

International tourists' decision making: Perspectives from frontline service providers

Jude Wilson

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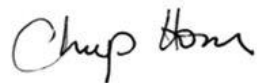
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Executive Summary

This report describes data collected as part of a project investigating international tourists' decision making in New Zealand. The research is a follow-up to a series of interviews undertaken with tourists in 2009 which explored their decision making (see Moore et al., 2009).

This research examined the ways in which people working in the tourism industry (i.e. frontline service providers) influence the tourist experience and tourist decision making and, in particular, explored the role of these frontline service providers as a social source of information and advice.

The research was undertaken in the Canterbury region and involved 27 semi-structured interviews with frontline tourism service providers (10 i-SITEs or information centres, 14 accommodation providers, 2 activity operators and a transport operator). The specific research locations were Christchurch, Kaikoura, Hanmer Springs, Geraldine, Ashburton, Timaru, Fairlie and Tekapo.

Interview topics addressed included perceptions of tourist decision making: the types of questions asked by tourists and typical responses/answers given to these questions; perception of tourist behaviour and categorisation of tourists by frontline staff; perceptions of tourists' decision making around itineraries, accommodation and activities.

A further set of questions focused on variations in decision making according to destination type and included: location on itinerary routes; variations in the attractions and activities on offer; types of tourists attracted; and, the stage of trip at which tourists visit particular destinations.

Interview data were analysed for key themes around the role of frontline service providers and the nature of their interaction with tourists. There was considerable variation in the amount and scope of the information material made available to tourists and in the amount and types of advice given by each of the frontline service providers. While a wide range of factors contribute to these differences they can be broadly grouped into:

- factors associated with the delivery of frontline service;
- the types of decisions tourists make;
- the types of tourists each encounter; and,
- the types and location of the destinations they represent.

While helping tourists is seen as an important customer service by all frontline tourism staff they can be differentiated according to their levels of professionalism, their personal knowledge and experience, the scope of assistance they offer and their degree of 'neutrality'. In addition, frontline service delivery involves an interaction between frontline staff and tourists; to facilitate this interaction frontline staff employ a range of customer service techniques, as well as taking on responsibility for telling tourists the things "*they need to know*" in order to travel in New Zealand.

In respect of the types of decisions tourists make, there are considerable variations in the input of the frontline service providers. These variations are affected by both the type of service provision offered and geographical location. Information centres and i-SITEs located in gateway centres (e.g., Christchurch city and airport), for example, are more likely to offer help and advice with respect to itinerary and transport decisions than do accommodation providers. In contrast, accommodation providers offer advice on local routes. In respect of accommodation decisions, many accommodation providers actively direct tourists to 'suitable' accommodation, whereas i-SITE staff are more 'neutral' in their approach.

Price was perceived to be a key driver of accommodation choice and participation in activities although there was some variation in this related to the type of tourists, stage of their trip, gender, what type of decision was being made and their motives for travel. The weather was found to affect tourists' decision making, their behaviour and to disrupt their travel plans.

Overall (and in contrast to the earlier tourist research), the 'Type of Trip' tourists were on did not feature as a key determinant of their travel behaviour and decision making approaches. Most respondents considered tourists to be very similar in respect of the type of information they both required and asked for. A key difference between frontline service providers, however, is that those tourists visiting i-SITEs and information centres are actively seeking information whereas many accommodation providers offer information and advice as part of the 'conversation' they have with their guests.

Many frontline service providers have long experience in various aspects of the tourism industry and as a result are potentially unaware of the ways in which they are able to quickly process relevant information about the tourists they encounter on a daily basis. This 'automatic' processing is being challenged by changes in the types of tourists coming to New Zealand (e.g., those arriving on low cost airlines who are less well-informed and less experienced as tourists) as well as by increased internet use by tourists which is changing the traditional ways in which all tourists are research, plan, make bookings and use information.

There was considerable reflection by respondents with regard to the type of destination they represented and how those destinations were perceived by tourists. A range of factors – geographic location, the stage of their trip at which tourists encounter it, the type of tourists visiting – contribute to a destinations' appeal. The importance of a destination having a key attraction was noted, particularly in respect of this providing a focus around which further development could be based. The extension of a destination's attraction beyond its immediate location was also noted and there are some strong destination connections between some tourist locations (e.g., Kaikoura and Hanmer Springs).

Geographic location helps determine at which stage of their trip tourists might visit a given destination; this stage of trip variable, in turn, impacts on tourists' behaviour and ultimately on the financial yields for tourism operators in those destinations. Informed and appropriate promotion and marketing is important in respect of attracting tourists to a particular destination and ensuring they have allowed enough time to enjoy its attractions.

Overall, the research has found that staff providing frontline tourism services enjoy their engagement with tourists and are universally driven by an altruistic desire to provide tourists with *"the best possible time in New Zealand"*. This is the case even for those working within the i-SITE network which has, at least in part, a commercial element to their service provision.

Frontline service providers offer an important practical service, via the provision of information material on destinations (both their own and others around New Zealand), on accommodation, attraction and activity options. This is important in respect of facilitating an 'easy' and safe travel experience. For tourists, however, social engagement with frontline service providers goes beyond the mere provision of information and facilitation of travel as it adds to tourists' enjoyment and forms part of the total New Zealand tourist experience.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Probably the most important part of my job is the talking I do and you get a little bit fed up with it because every day you get all the same questions, but again every person is different and they are on holiday and are not familiar with the country – we are familiar with the country and we are hosts – that is what we are” – Accommodation provider.

This report describes data collected as part of a project investigating international tourists’ decision making in New Zealand. The research is a follow-up to a series of interviews undertaken with tourists in 2009 which explored their decision making (see Moore et al., 2009). This new set of interviews was designed to examine the other side (i.e., the information supply side) of tourists’ decision making and to confirm some of the key findings from the tourist interviews. The earlier tourist research found there to be a widely held perception of ‘ease of travel’ in New Zealand, fostered by a comprehensive tourist infrastructure combined with the helpfulness of New Zealanders (both in the tourism industry and more generally). Results indicated that tourists base many of their travel decisions on a combination of information sources including on-site information (in the form of signs, brochures and maps) and, most importantly, by actively seeking social sources of information and advice (e.g., over activities, accommodation, restaurants, etc) and reassurance/reinforcement of contemplated decisions. Frontline service providers (i.e., staff in information centres, accommodation, tourist activity, and transport businesses) are the primary source of this social advice and of on-site information material.

Chapter 2

Method

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to investigate the type of information and advice international tourists seek, and receive, from frontline tourism staff, the experience of those frontline staff of giving advice to tourists, and to confirm the findings from the earlier tourist interviews. Topics covered in the interviews included:

- Perceptions of tourist decision making
 - the types of questions asked by tourists and typical responses/answers given to these questions
 - their (frontline staff) perceptions of tourists, including categorisation of tourist types, and tourist decision making around itineraries, accommodation, activities, etc
- Destinations
 - location on itinerary routes
 - attractions/activities on offer and types of tourists attracted
 - stage of trip at which tourists visit

2.1 Participant selection

To align with the earlier tourist research, this set of interviews was carried out in the Canterbury region at five key tourist locations. These were selected to represent different destination types: gateway (Christchurch); terminal (Akaroa and, to a lesser extent, Hanmer Springs); and through-route (Kaikoura and Tekapo). As Table 1 shows, in addition to the original research locations a number of other information centres were also included to capture frontline service providers who encounter tourists travelling 'between' key tourist destinations in the Canterbury region. Altogether, 10 interviews were with information centre staff; all but two of which were part of the official New Zealand i-SITE network. The earlier research indicated that the i-SITE network is an important and popular source of information for international tourists.

Within each location, the local i-SITE or information centre along with selected representatives from the accommodation, activity and transport sectors were approached and asked to participate in the research. The accommodation providers were selected (with the assistance of the local information centres) to represent a range of business 'types' based on a mix of criteria, including: the type of accommodation itself (i.e., backpackers, motels, etc); business affiliation (i.e., to nationwide chains or other accommodation networks); and, prominence in the local market (i.e., based on popularity, location or length of operation). The length of involvement or experience of potential interviewees in either that business, or in the tourism sector in general, was also a consideration. Backpacker and holiday park accommodation providers were over-represented as the earlier research indicated that tourists staying in this type of accommodation were more likely to seek assistance and advice from their accommodation hosts. As a result of this selection process the accommodation interviews included:

- Backpackers (6) – two Youth Hostel Association (YHA) and four independent hostels (two of which belonged to the Budget Backpacker Hostel (BBH) network);
- Holiday Parks (4) – three from the Top 10 chain and one independent – all of which also offered some motel accommodation;
- Motels (2) – both independent, although one belonged to the Golden Chain group;

- Hotels (2) – The Hanmer Heritage (part of the nationwide Heritage Hotel Group) and the Godley Hotel in Tekapo (which, with two hotels in Omarama and one in Twizel, make up the Aoraki/Mt Cook Hotel Collection).

In Hanmer Springs, two prominent activity providers were also interviewed: while both offered a range of activities, one also provided independent tourist information and booking services. The Akaroa sample included only one accommodation provider and the information centre. During the winter season, many Akaroa tourism accommodation and activity operators either close down or offer reduced service. Also, as a result of the impact of the earthquakes on both the accommodation and activity sectors, only the i-SITE staff and a transport provider (a nationwide Campervan rental company with a depot in Christchurch) were interviewed in Christchurch. At the time of the research, both Christchurch i-SITEs were operating in temporary premises – the Airport i-SITE as a result of airport redevelopment and the City i-SITE as a result of earthquake displacement. In all interviews respondents were asked to focus (as far as was possible) on their interactions with tourists pre-earthquakes.

The interviews were undertaken during June and July 2011, when many tourism businesses were in their quiet winter season; the ongoing effects of the February and June Christchurch earthquakes impacted significantly on the availability and selection of respondents. Respondents, by location and tourism sector involvement (i.e., type of frontline service provider) are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Respondents by location and tourism sector involvement

Destination - Location	Information Centres	Accommodation Provider				Activity Operator	Transport Operator
		Back-packers	Holiday Park	Motel	Hotel		
Hanmer Springs	i-SITE	2.	1	1	1	2	
Kaikoura	i-SITE	2	1	1			
Akaroa	Information centre		1				
Tekapo	i-SITE	2	1		1		
Christchurch	City i-SITE Airport i-SITE						1
Ashburton	i-SITE	1					
Geraldine	i-SITE	1					
Fairlie	Information centre	1					
Timaru	i-SITE	1					
Total Interviews	10	6	4	2	2	2	1

2.2 Interview procedure

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour with most taking around 45 minutes. Altogether, 26 of the 27 interviews were undertaken in the respondents' work places; this enabled some real-time insights into their interactions with tourists and observations of their information and brochure displays. All interviews were conducted by one of the lead researchers from the earlier tourist research. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the exception of one interviewee who asked not to be recorded; in this case the interviewer took notes throughout the interview. While interview data provided by the i-SITEs and information centres is sometimes

attributed to its (destination) source, as far as possible no other respondents are identified specifically.

The interview data were analysed for key themes around the role of frontline service providers and the nature of their interaction with tourists. While the primary research interest was in frontline service providers' perspectives on international tourists' decision making, to a large extent the data were allowed to 'speak for themselves' and thus offered a much broader insight into the role of frontline service providers in respect of the New Zealand tourist experience in general. These interview data are presented in five parts relating to: frontline service providers; frontline service delivery; tourist decision making behaviour; types of tourists; and, types of destinations.

Chapter 3

Frontline Service Providers

Frontline engagement ranges from the formal, designated and official tourism ‘services’ (such as those provided by the i-SITE network and other information centres which operate all over New Zealand) to more informal services offered by accommodation providers and others involved in the tourism sector. In addition to these ‘obvious’ tourism exchanges, tourists are also given advice from numerous other people they encounter in supermarkets, local shops, restaurants and cafes, petrol stations and social settings; there is also considerable information and advice exchange between tourists as they travel.

The following sections introduce the frontline service providers interviewed and describe their role in respect of their geographic and informational scope and the types of information material they provide. While all of these frontline service providers offer some information material to tourists the amount and type of material (i.e., what and where it is for) varies considerably.

3.1 Information centres

Tourism New Zealand operates more than 80 i-SITEs around New Zealand as part of the official Visitor Information Network. All i-SITEs are open 7 days a week and offer tourist information and booking services, but their focus and range of services both vary according to their location. The i-SITEs in gateway destinations (such as Christchurch), for example, serve a wide range of traveller types (e.g., international and domestic tourists, business travellers, and so on) and deal with broad itinerary, transport (e.g., public services, tours and rental vehicle options), accommodation, activity, and general information enquiries relating to a large spatial area (e.g., Christchurch i-SITE staff cover the whole of the South Island). The Christchurch Airport i-SITE deals primarily with transport and accommodation enquiries. In contrast, regional i-SITEs are much more focused on their local area and deal primarily with accommodation or attraction/activity and, to a lesser extent, transport enquiries; in smaller centres, however, they are often the primary booking office (for residents as well as tourists) for public buses, trains and the interisland ferry (Photo 1).

Photo 1
Timaru i-SITE, showing transport advertisements



In many destinations information centres display, and sell, Department of Conservation (DOC) brochures describing local walks and places of interest. Many i-SITEs also have a retail component (i.e., selling souvenirs). While they may not have an official i-SITE, smaller New Zealand towns (such as for example, Akaroa and Fairlie) commonly have either an information centre, or information kiosk providing local maps and tourist information.

The i-SITEs are usually centrally located and well-signposted. They commonly have sandwich boards on display outside their premises. These advertise tourism and transport services (e.g., local activities and accommodation, or New Zealand-wide transport services); often they are simple handwritten boards with details of local attractions and activities (see Photos 2 & 3). Inside, they offer a range of free brochures representing a wide array of tourism services. To some extent, the range of brochures available reflects each i-SITE's geographic scope (e.g., the Christchurch airport i-SITE covers all of New Zealand, the Christchurch city i-SITE covers the South Island, the Hanmer Springs i-SITE primarily focuses on the upper South Island, and so on). All information centres, however, have some information on 'key' tourist destinations such as Milford Sound and Queenstown. They also offer free local maps (which show accommodation, attractions, and other useful local information); some travel companies (e.g., Jasons, YHA) publish free regional and New Zealand maps which i-SITEs distribute. An A4 map of i-SITE locations around New Zealand is also freely available. Tourism New Zealand (2011) research found that maps were the most common information collected (by 69% of i-SITE visitors) at i-SITEs in 2010/11. For tourism businesses, there are charges associated with displaying brochures through the i-SITE network.

Photo 2

Tourism and transport services advertised outside Akaroa Information Centre



Photo 3
Handwritten information boards outside Kaikoura i-SITE



3.2 Accommodation providers

Accommodation providers are less likely to be asked about overall itineraries or transport options than are members of staff in information centres. Tourists sometimes seek help with other accommodation bookings, but more often request information about attractions and activities in that destination, particularly with respect to eating places. They also explore options for their onward travel and, in particular, the route they might take when leaving that destination and places of interest *en route* to their next overnight stopping point. Overall, accommodation providers are called on to provide advice and information about a much smaller spatial area than are staff at information centres.

There is some variation in the types of information material displayed by different accommodation providers. Hotels and motels usually have brochure display stands in their reception areas, although these are often quite small. In general, motels display a greater number and larger variety of brochures; often in smaller hotels (such as those included in this research) the brochures on display are either strongly local (rather than regional) or brand loyal (i.e., for other hotels in the same chain). Motels and hotels usually have information packs in their units or rooms with details of their own accommodation services, local attractions and activities and a selection of menus from local restaurants. Many hotels and motels also broadcast a local promotional television channel in rooms. Motels often display either regional or New Zealand wall maps in their reception areas.

It is also common to find wall maps on display in the reception or communal areas of backpacker accommodation, alongside posters advertising local attractions and activities. Brochure displays in backpackers are usually for other backpacker accommodation, rather than for attractions; some carry brochures for every other backpackers in the South Island, whereas others only display those in the local region (or in destinations that tourists might reach within a few days of their current location). This is possibly a reflection of the tendency, reported in the interviews, for backpacker tourists to book only a few days ahead. The YHA hostels have large displays of material relating their own nationwide network. In addition to poster displays in their communal areas, most backpackers also have folders with information on local walks. Some backpackers have an open notice board for

guests to post messages and advertisements and these sometimes attract other commercial notices. Most have some disclaimer that they take no responsibility for the information displayed.

Most holiday parks have information folders (the same as found in motels) in their units and have wall maps on display in reception areas. The Top 10 Holiday Parks give prominence to their own network of holiday parks in their brochure displays, but similar to independent holiday parks also display brochures for local attractions and, occasionally, ones from further afield.

In general, accommodation providers do not explicitly source or request the brochures they display; instead they sometimes receive them by post or through personal delivery (from other accommodation or activity providers). Some of the accommodation providers interviewed reported making annual delivery runs to other destinations. The Fiordland-based company *Real Journeys* was mentioned by several respondents as being particularly active in this respect; the number of their brochures on display in Canterbury accommodation premises was also evidence of this. While bookings might primarily come through websites, brochures are perceived to be a useful form of advertising, especially when tourists take them home and show them to others. Some accommodation providers, however, reported that brochures are often left behind in units or rooms when guests depart.

3.3 Activity & transport providers

Activity providers are also frequently asked for information on regional and local travel routes, accommodation options, eating places and other attractions or activities. Giving out free information, while time consuming, is seen as *“good exposure and helps build relationships within the wider tourism community”*. In this respect, even competitor companies are perceived to be part of the overall attraction package offered by a destination and, as such, deserve promotion and encouragement. This attitude, however, did not appear to be driven by any formal agreements between companies. Both activity providers interviewed displayed brochures for attractions and activities (other than their own) and accommodation in their destination, as well as some for the wider South Island. Activity providers often have their own signage and advertising displayed in multiple locations within a destination. They may also employ innovative marketing techniques. The Hanmer Springs Jet boat operator, for example, attracts tourists’ attention with models of their boat displayed at a variety of locations in Hanmer Springs (Photo 4). The other activity operator interviewed broadcasts a street-facing video of their activities when their office is closed.

Transport providers are commonly located in gateway destinations and offer information services similar to gateway i-SITEs. They primarily advise tourists with respect to overall itinerary planning. They also focus to some extent on regional destinations that fall within an easy distance for a first-day drive (e.g., from Christchurch, Akaroa or Hanmer Springs are often recommended). Information packs, including maps, are given out with campervans; a new addition to the information provided is a tourism radio service which offers GPS linked commentary for tourists as they drive around. The campervan depot reception area also had brochures for a variety of South Island destinations on display.

While brochures, destination maps and other information material are important resources for tourists, both the earlier research and the data collected here, indicate that they also continually collect and update information via personal engagement with the frontline tourism staff they encounter. In addition to variation in the amount and scope of the information material made available to tourists, as noted above, there is also considerable variation in the amount and types of advice given by the various frontline service providers. A wide range of factors contribute to these differences, but they can be broadly grouped into:

- factors associated with the delivery of frontline service;
- the types of decisions tourists make (e.g., for itineraries, accommodation and activities);
- the types of tourists each encounter; and,
- the type and location of the destination they represent.

These factors are addressed in the next four chapters.

Photo 4
Jet boat 'activity' advertising outside Hanmer Springs i-SITE



Chapter 4

Delivery of Frontline Service

While helping tourists is seen as an important customer service by all frontline tourism staff the service they offer can be differentiated according to their levels of professionalism, their personal knowledge and experience, the scope of assistance they offer and their degree of 'neutrality'. In addition, frontline service delivery involves an interaction between frontline staff and tourists; to facilitate this interaction, frontline staff employ a range of customer service techniques, as well as taking on responsibility for teaching tourists the things *"they need to know"* in order to travel in New Zealand.

4.1 Levels of professionalism

At one extreme are the professionally-trained information centre staff, employed in businesses which formally provide, and financially benefit from, the provision of tourism services. Despite having a commercial element to their operation, i-SITE staff preferred to refer to tourists as 'visitors' (rather than customers). Professional training for information centre staff focuses on practical training in the use of booking systems and knowledge of New Zealand-wide tourism products. Their professionalism is evident through the i-SITE Network branding, and the use of staff uniforms and name badges (*"our uniform is part of our branding, we have our name badges and it is all part of that communication process with the visitor"*). It was also common for staff to go on 'famils' (i.e., going out and trying – at no cost – tourism products themselves), although it was noted that some people are more proactive than others in taking advantage of the famils offered.

In contrast, most accommodation and activity providers do not gain financially from helping tourists beyond their own service provision. Accommodation providers tend to refer to tourists as 'guests'. While most accommodation providers thought it was very time consuming helping tourists they noted the *"importance of being out there talking to people"* and that *"it is what we are here for"*. Many of the accommodation providers interviewed reported an expectation by tourists that they will know *"everything about everywhere"*, but there was some variation in how 'qualified' they felt to give tourists information. Often, the help they offer is based on their own personal experience, rather than on what they might have learned through formal training programmes.

4.2 Knowledge & experience

For all frontline staff, both personal knowledge and experience in the job (or in the tourism industry) were important in respect of how qualified they felt to help tourists. Although accommodation providers do not have the same formal training as information centre staff, many of the accommodation providers interviewed had considerable levels of tourism expertise from working or being involved in other roles in the tourism sector (e.g., they had previously had worked in i-SITEs, for Air New Zealand or for activity operators). Also, many of the respondents had experience of other tourism destinations in New Zealand; several of the holiday park operators interviewed, for example, had managed parks in other locations. Many had also been on industry famils. Industry famils were seen as important by all the respondents. In respect of activities, for example, it is important to know the differences between similar (or competing) products. Having personal experience of these helps when telling tourists exactly what they involve.

Respondents noted the importance of ensuring they had up-to-date information on all aspects of the tourism experience. An important means of keeping up-to-date was through feedback from tourists themselves and accommodation providers, in particular, have a keen awareness of what activities

tourists are doing (and enjoying) in their region/destination. This feedback is often explicitly sought, e.g., by asking tourists when they have done something what they saw, how it felt, what the trip was like, and so on. Sometimes tourists can provide useful information that would otherwise be difficult to get. For example, a frontline staff member might ask someone in Hanmer Springs where they went fishing and if it was a good spot. Rental vehicle companies also get feedback from tourists returning their vehicles and they pass this information onto other tourists. The Ashburton i-SITE had instigated a system whereby they give some tourists a postcard with a stamp and address, and ask them to send them some feedback on their trip – while this kept them up-to-date with *“what things were like”*, the staff also enjoyed hearing back from people rather than *“sending them off and never hearing from them again”*.

Keeping up-to-date was particularly important with respect to eating places, as they tended to change more often (e.g., ownership, menus or prices might change) than other segments of the tourism sector. Where to eat was also the ‘number one’ question asked of many respondents and their ‘local’ opinion was valued by tourists. Many frontline staff, however, noted that in order to recommend a good place to eat they would have to be confident that tourists would get a good meal.

Most respondents also suggested that time in the job, an interest in people and passion for their destination was also important in providing effective and appropriate advice. Many went out of their way (e.g., often outside their formal working hours) to stay informed of what was happening in the local area – trying different restaurants and cafes when they went out to eat themselves, checking local newspapers for events and generally keeping an eye on what was happening around their town. One i-SITE respondent noted that she *“researched a lot about the town myself – in my own time – people [visiting] might be crafty people and would love to stop off in places like that here and us knowing where they are in our community is good”*. The age and general experience of respondents was also important, as one older i-SITE respondent noted, *“I am lucky – I have been to many more places than the younger girls”*. One accommodation provider noted that she knew her part of the country much better than she would have otherwise done purely as a result of her job. As another accommodation provider noted, [in their destination] they were *“lucky to have awesome ladies working at local i-SITE who know local history”*.

Other aspects of the tourism experience are ‘easier’ to know about – Qualmark ratings, for example, give some indication of accommodation standards without the need for personal experience. The interview data suggested that Qualmark ratings are used more often by frontline service providers than by tourists (i.e., most respondents reported that tourists rarely ask about Qualmark ratings).

4.2.1 Local (& New Zealand) perspectives

The emphasis in i-SITE advertising is on the provision of ‘local’ information by local people and almost all respondents reported being asked if they were ‘local’. The reality was that many of those interviewed were not native New Zealanders. The Geraldine i-SITE staff reported that *“a lot of people say they have gone into some i-SITEs and there were no New Zealanders working there and they don’t like it – they want to be served by a New Zealander”*. Other i-SITE respondents, however, reported that some tourists feel more at ease dealing with someone that understands their culture and language. Pre-earthquake, the Christchurch City i-SITE had a team of 27 and *“we used to speak 13 languages – for some tourists it is a reassurance to talk to someone in your own language”*. Also, while some foreign-born i-SITE staff might be *“imports themselves, they are almost more passionate about New Zealand because they have chosen to move here”*.

A number of the accommodation and activity operators also reported tourists’ comments with regard to the number of non-New Zealanders they had encountered across the tourism sector. On the whole, however, tourists did not perceive this to be an issue once the service providers’

credentials (i.e., the length of time they had lived in a particular destination, or been the owner of, or employed by, the tourism business) were established. Although several of the backpacker respondents were not New Zealanders, they reported that they were rarely asked where they were from. It may be that the type of tourists staying in backpacker accommodation have a lower expectation of encountering New Zealanders – backpackers often employ longer-staying tourists as staff – or that, as one respondent noted (similar to the Christchurch i-SITE), *“my passion for New Zealand is so strong anyway people just respond to that”*. When accommodation providers employed tourists, however, they generally took care not to expose them as ‘frontline staff’ because it was *“not fair either on them or on the tourists”*.

4.3 Scope of assistance

As the official information service provider, i-SITE staff members are generally more experienced and more knowledgeable than accommodation and activity providers. In addition to answering questions about tourism sites and activities, they also field more general questions about local history and the natural environment and local area services. The Tekapo i-SITE, for example, are asked about the colour of Lake Tekapo, the lupins (which tourists want to see), the history of the church and the dog statue, as well as the name of a bird they may have seen, alongside a range of ‘where to find’ questions: toilets (the most common question), an ATM (a recent addition to Tekapo), free internet access, the local library (which they do not have), the nearest chemist (in Fairlie) or dentist (in Timaru). The day before their interview they had been asked by some Asian tourists if there was a MacDonald’s or a KFC in Tekapo.

The questions asked by tourists often reflect either the type of destination, or the type of tourists that a specific destination attracts. During the winter season, for example, the i-SITE is the first place people come if they are worried about the snow conditions on roads. The Akaroa information centre reported being asked where to find doctors and hospitals, a local JP, babysitters and WWOOFing¹ places; the latter a reflection of Akaroa’s popularity with working holiday makers². The Akaroa Information Centre also has staff based at the local wharf to cater for cruise ship tourists during the summer season.

Many accommodation providers are aware of their own limitations and will send people to the local i-SITE for information about things they are not familiar with (e.g., outside their own region) or are unable to make bookings for (e.g., too distant in respect of either location or time). The accommodation providers’ opinion of the quality of i-SITE information was mixed, however, with some respondents seeing them as being a source of more *“accurate”*, more *“specialised”* or more *“up-to-date”* information and others preferring to take over all responsibility for informing and helping tourists. Some respondents indicated that they preferred not to send their guests to the i-SITE because they did not trust the i-SITE to give good information or to be as enthusiastic (as they are); others simply did not see the need, as they were capable of dealing with everything themselves.

There were some differences in accommodation providers’ ability and knowledge, and the scope of their help dependent on whether they were part of a nationwide chain and how their model of operation worked – e.g., while Top 10 is a nationwide group, the individual holiday parks are more

1 WWOOF – Willing Workers on Organic Farms is a popular employment option for working holiday makers in New Zealand.

2 A number of the tourists interviewed in Akaroa in the earlier research were WWOOFing.

or less autonomous, whereas the YHA is more unified and strongly networked. The advantage in this for the YHA hostels is that, as a New Zealand-wide network, they are able to do New Zealand-wide bookings (which the YHA organisation receives commission for); in this respect they operate in parallel to the i-SITE network. The YHA hostel operators also appear to be active about keeping tourists within their own network (e.g., they will tell tourists it is free to book through them rather than having to go to the i-SITE).

The types of questions asked in each destination varies and this also impacts on the likelihood of an accommodation provider sending their guests to the i-SITE. The Kaikoura holiday park operator, for example, reported being mostly asked about Kaikoura so did not send people on, whereas in Tekapo they did, especially for places outside their own area as they *“don’t have the expertise on those places”*. There was universal agreement (by both information centres and accommodation providers and in all destinations) that DOC offered more *“hands-on”* information with regard to walks; often this information was more time consuming to pass on so was *“left to the experts”*. Rental vehicle staff members recommend that tourists go to i-SITEs for local information on freedom camping, on things to do and in order to keep informed and up-to-date on road conditions. They themselves are asked a lot of questions about the interisland ferry (*“How much in advance to book it?”*, *“How many boats?”*, *“How long it takes?”*, *“Is it safe?”*)

4.4 Neutrality

While all respondents commented that they tried to be ‘neutral’ when advising tourists, there was a strong sense in interviews that this was not as great a concern for accommodation providers as it was for information centre staff. Information centre staff tell tourists that they represent every tourism business in the region, so they cannot recommend any particular one. They make considerable effort to describe the differences between different tourism options and businesses. Explaining these differences is *“our way out”* of having to recommend one over another. With local walks they do not have the same concerns and might tell tourists which ones they personally prefer. Some information centre staff admitted that they would never send tourists to accommodation that they themselves would not stay in. Rather than explicitly stating this, however, they might describe some options as being *“very budget”* or *“tired”*.

In general, accommodation providers were more opinionated than information centre staff and sometimes more dismissive of individual tourist’s interests (e.g., *“if they are coming to Kaikoura they are coming to see the whales anyway”*). Often frontline staff convey an opinion without realising it, as in the case where a respondent described telling tourists that they could either *“take the long and winding road”* on the inland route between Hanmer Springs and Kaikoura, or take the alternative route which is *“lovely to go up the coast and you can see seals”*. Also, while accommodation providers were more or less neutral with regard to activities they were (understandably) less so in respect of accommodation (particularly if they were part of an accommodation chain) – verbally promoting their own chain as well as having more brochures on display.

Overall, however, most respondents took considerable care not to favour one business over another, or to denigrate any other business. Various strategies were employed to avoid giving an outright opinion or judgement. Rather than openly criticising bad businesses, for example, they might (subtly) suggest that tourists would prefer another, or when asked *“which is best?”*, or *“what should we do?”* they pass the decision back to the tourist (after carefully explaining the various options available). Being asked if an activity was *“worth the money”* was one of the more difficult questions to answer. There was a sense that operators in any one sector (e.g., activity or accommodation) were less concerned about displaying bias towards operators in another sector. Often they might have altruistic motives such as in the case of an activity provider encouraging tourists to stay in smaller and less busy holiday parks, so as to *“share money around in the*

destination better". Also, most were relatively happy not to recommend particular food places – compared to activities – possibly because there is greater potential for negative feedback from a poor eating experience.

There is a tension between being honest with tourists and providing good service (through giving honest advice). According to one i-SITE respondent, for example, even if you know a particular experience is not the best *"you have to be very careful because you are either going to upset your product holder or give your customer a bad experience"*. Often, frontline staff take personal responsibility for tourists' experiences recognising that if they give bad advice, and a tourist subsequently has a bad experience, it reflects badly on them personally. Poor frontline services – particularly from private information centres – are perceived to reflect badly on a destination as a whole, as do accommodation providers who push activities that they do not know, purely to keep tourists longer in their destination. Most respondents reported taking great care not to mislead tourists. They always told tourists if they have personally experienced something. Others, however, were happy to admit to being *"biased"*, taking care to tell people they were giving their *"personal preference"*. One respondent commented that rather than being perceived as neutral, it is important that tourists see that the person they are talking to *"really cares"* about the place; another that *"neutrality does not matter as much as a personal recommendation"*. Some i-SITE staff, however, talked about needing to remain impartial and having to *"be really accountable here – you can't stretch the truth too much"*.

4.4.1 Honesty, trust, enthusiasm & passion

What drives most frontline staff is a desire for tourists to have the best possible experience; to ensure this it is important to have a *"passion for New Zealand – we want tourists to experience and enjoy the best of what New Zealand offers, [to ensure] that tourists have a great time – and ensure that they don't waste their time on the wrong things"*. Being honest with tourists is important in respect of what tourists can do, and with regard to one's own position and experience. One respondent noted, for example, that *"I would like tourists to go away thinking that the lady at the hotel was good [at giving information] and honest with us [so we didn't waste time]"*; another admitted to *"telling people pretty quickly [when they ask if I am a local] that I haven't been here very long"*.

Building a relationship with tourists is important and, for activity operators in particular, helps generate a sense of trust:

- *"As an activity operator, if you have given someone a good experience, you then are perceived to be 'very trustworthy'"*;
- *"If you take time to build trust – asking how their experiences were, what their plans are – and build a relationship then people more open to your suggestions"*; and,
- *"Because they have built a relationship with you they will trust you"*.

There is also a trust relationship between the various operators in the tourism sector whereby, in the case of smaller companies accommodation providers rely on their own personal knowledge of the people running those companies (and therefore knowing what they would be like); in the case of larger companies they 'trust' that they would have to follow the (safety) rules and that if they were a 'bad' company they would not be operating. There is a widespread assumption that being a large tourism company equates to being a good tourism company. i-SITE managers tell their staff that the tourists they deal with *"put a lot of trust in them and have saved a lot of money and time to come here [to New Zealand] so we have to make sure we give them the best possible experience we can while they are here"*. Providing the best possible experience for tourists might include demonstrating a professional level of knowledge, as in the case of a non-New Zealand i-SITE staff member who

noted that *"sometimes a little bit of your help can make a big difference – like you ask for a quiet room or Room 11 or something – these little details show you are professional to people and they [the tourists] probably trust you more – when people come to me [for help] they probably think 'she's not a Kiwi' – not local – but after it is OK"*.

Having some personal experience of the things they are telling tourists about is very important. As one i-SITE respondent noted *"I have done Milford Sound and Doubtful Sound and just loved them and when I tell people about them it is easy because I am telling the truth and people say it must be good because you are so enthusiastic about it"*. While from a service perspective it *"doesn't look good on our part if people ask about things and we don't know"*, it is also vital to be *"enthusiastic about them having a good time"*. As one respondent noted they *"like to treat people the way you would like to be treated"*. With respect to the destination *"I believe that passion for the place sells"*. The personality, expertise and experience of the tourism staff involved are important.

4.5 Customer service strategies

Frontline service involves a customer service interaction between tourism staff and tourists. Giving good customer service involves going beyond just responding to the questions tourists ask: there is also a need to ensure that they have adequate information to enjoy their holiday in New Zealand. As one respondent noted, *"I have always looked at it like if you can provide everything you possibly can and they have walked out the door and you have helped them – you have done everything and I put into the staff that no matter how busy you are you help them, because if they have had a bad experience [from you] then everything you do in the world cannot fix it"*. If tourists have a good trip *"that is what will bring them back"*, but it is not just about individual encounters with frontline staff – all their experiences in New Zealand contribute to their experience.

Frontline service providers employ a range of strategies to deal with tourists – many time-saving measures are employed by i-SITEs to deal with busy queues of people and by accommodation hosts to fit tourists' questions around the many other demands they have on their time. Both i-SITE and accommodation staff might suggest that tourists go and look at some brochures and then come back later when they have questions – as much to take pressure off themselves, as to help the tourists.

Frontline staff also recognise that people have different decision making behaviours (i.e., some are needier, and more time-consuming, than others). Pre-earthquake, the Christchurch City i-SITE had several counters operating: *"the main counter with experienced staff mainly doing itineraries and rental cars, and travel around all of the South Island, or all of New Zealand, then a Christchurch and Canterbury counter – new summer staff dealing with lots of local questions on what they [tourists] can do in Christchurch and excursions from Christchurch"*. A 'floating' staff member was used to answer easy questions (e.g., toilets, bus stops) and to ensure that tourists were waiting at the right counter and that *"tourists with more difficult questions would get served by the more experienced staff"*. Other i-SITEs also use a floating staff member when they get busy (to answer easy questions and reassure those waiting that someone will be with them shortly). Also, while the counter staff will try and make eye contact with those tourists waiting in line to ensure they know they have been seen, they recognise that *"the person in front of you is the one who is the most important – a lot of people worry about taking up a lot of our time – but we don't want them going away with a half-answered request"*.

Dealing with larger groups of people is also challenging in i-SITEs as they take longer to make a decision between the group members *"but if you factor that into it, and give them a bit of time within a parameter – like say to them that I'll need to book that activity for them before such and such a time to get them on it today – so if you can work it out in your group – there's a space over there with a seat if you want to have a chat together"*. Limited space in some i-SITEs, however, might

mean that, after giving them some options it is then easier to send a group away to decide what they want to do over coffee. One i-SITE respondent commented that with respect to decision making within groups, the challenge was actually *“their [the groups] challenge”*, whereas for i-SITE staff it was *“just a matter of giving them as much [information] as you can”*.

A number of respondents noted that a travel group will usually have a leader amongst them. As the Airport i-SITE respondent noted, *“A group will take longer to decide – you kind of want to stay at it because it is a good sale and you can sometimes pick the decision maker within the group and if you can convince them, you get the sale”*. The number of people travelling together also strongly influences the transport options gateway i-SITE staff recommend: *“If it is a group they all have to decide – if it is a hire car they want the smallest car, but they have to be realistic if there are four of them travelling with a big bag each they won’t fit – sometimes my staff have to be quite authoritative and tell them what is necessary”*.

If dealing with individuals, accommodation providers can find out a lot about them and their interests just through general conversation when they are booking them into the accommodation. If a large group is booking in the accommodation provider might assign one person (from staff) to check people in and another to give out tourist information. This strategy is employed in both holiday parks (which can host several hundred people and have some very busy periods in peak season at their check-in desks) and at backpackers which accommodate large groups from bus tours (e.g. Kiwi Experience and Magic Bus). Holiday parks, for example, often have staff available who can take tourists outside (away from the people who are checking-in) to talk to them about their options in that destination. While tour groups might have their own guides to take care of their information needs, having a large group staying often reduces the time accommodation providers have available for any independent tourists.

It also makes a difference what type of help and information a tourist is seeking. In Akaroa, for example, if an accommodation provider’s guests want information about things that might take a long time to give (e.g., local walks) they would send them to a local information centre, whereas if it only requires simple facts or handing out a brochure (e.g., for dolphin swimming) they will do it themselves. Another strategy is to give tourists only ‘appropriate’ or ‘relevant’ information, or to filter information (e.g., if there has been snow, an accommodation provider in Hanmer Springs might not even suggest the inland route to Kaikoura).

Similarly, the Hanmer Springs i-SITE staff will first determine if tourists are interested in either the active or the passive activities the destination offers before *“launching off on totally the wrong things”*. Giving people too much information at once is perceived to be a waste of time, as they *“forget”* – especially after they have been travelling. It is therefore seen as best to let them find their room, ‘freshen up’ and then invite them back to the desk. In the long run, finding out what the tourist is interested in is a time saving strategy on the part of the frontline staff. However, if there is not much on offer in a destination – Tekapo, for example, according to one respondent *“just has walks and the star gazing”* – it is easier to simply tell all tourists what there is – i.e., they do not have to spend the time to find out what that particular tourist prefers. It is often easier for frontline staff focus on the *“must-do”* activities (i.e., those that appeal to the majority of tourists and therefore require less effort to give advice and information about).

Activity providers have a *“sales speech”* in which they tell visitors everything they need to know before they start asking questions – a process that they find reduces confusion. Likewise, when suggesting accommodation options i-SITE staff might establish what people are looking for and what their price range is *“rather than blinding them with a whole lot of information and wasting their time and our time”*.

It can be a challenge to deal with difficult people (but very satisfying to “*crack it with them*”) and there is something to be said for being able to ‘read’ people – i.e., “*knowing how far you can go with them*”. The activity operators reported that their guides talk to tourists on the way to an activity and get a feel for what that person is like. They also find that being friendly towards them ensures that tourists do not feel pressurised: they [the guides] do not want to appear superior to the tourists and the guides become their ‘friends’ when they are doing things. Some i-SITE staff find that international tourists “*just don’t understand the New Zealand weather and you have to explain it to them, but the thing is you need to do it in a manner that they don’t feel silly*”. One holiday park operator noted the importance of “*introducing people to the area and making them feel comfortable*”.

A number of the accommodation providers interviewed noted that they do make more effort to help people whose English is not good. They will, for example, make phone calls on their behalf to activity providers or other accommodation. If there are language problems they might draw pictures to help people. The free local maps distributed by information centres (and available at the receptions of most accommodation) and regional or New Zealand maps published by tourism companies such as Jason’s and the YHA are used to show tourists alternative routes (e.g., between Hanmer Springs and Kaikoura). As one respondent noted, “*tourists use of English affects how much I tell people – if I think I am not getting through to them I will usually go to something like the Jason’s maps that have the red bits on them where I can show them the places of interest*”. The Christchurch i-SITE respondent noted that, “*[I] spend a lot of time with the map – I like to use the YHA one – it is free and has good detail and I like it – it also means it shows them [tourists] where the YHAs are located – plus the driving times on it are fairly accurate*”.

The i-SITEs or information centres in destinations such as Geraldine and Fairlie deal with many tourists who are just passing through *en route* to other destinations, and their information material reflects this. In Geraldine, for example, a large painted wall map of the region includes a graphic showing how far it is (in driving time) to other destinations tourists are likely to be driving to (Photo 5); in addition to their local area map, the Fairlie information centre stocks a wide array of free, town tourist maps (e.g., Geraldine, Tekapo, Twizel, Timaru, Oamaru, Queenstown) which they find tourists like to have in advance of arriving in those places. Maps are also useful to convey information to tourists about what is on offer in a destination as they provide ‘framing’ for their experience in that place.

Photo 5
Wall map showing driving distances at Geraldine i-SITE



A number of respondents commented on the increase in the use of GPS by tourists and although generally considered to be useful for tourists, this type of route finding technology does have a number of pitfalls. Tekapo i-SITE staff, for example, reported that while Asian tourists are not good with maps, a lot travel using GPS technology which requires an address and *“you can’t put in the Aoraki/Mt Cook salmon farm and you can’t put in Aoraki/Mt Cook”*. Giving tourists a simple map and then showing them on the map where they need to go is perceived to be a better option. The Geraldine i-SITE also encounters quite a few tourists who have driven the wrong way following GPS directions.

Often tourists do not approach staff directly in i-SITEs, instead preferring to browse the brochure stands. While staff in i-SITEs are usually very proactive about going out from behind their counter to ask if people want help with anything, they do find that tourists think *“they are going to be pestered, but they relax when you start chatting and build up a bit of a rapport and say ‘oh, are you planning a bit of a holiday’ and then you can tell them they have found the right brochures or offer them another one”*. If an i-SITE has a retail (souvenir) section the staff are careful to leave the tourists browsing there alone, but find that *“nine times out of ten tourists looking at brochures do actually want help”*. The Timaru i-SITE respondent, however, noted that *“even if you go over to them at the brochure stand if you don’t ask them the right questions they will say ‘just looking’”*. While the ‘right questions’ can be about what (or where) they are interested in, it is mostly just a way to get them talking.

The word *“conversation”* was also used a lot by accommodation and activity operators to describe their engagement with tourists, giving the exchange both a personal and interactive flavour. A ‘conversation’ with tourists was also part of the pick-up procedure for vehicle rentals. There, the staff will ask what plans people have made, what their direction of travel is and get a feeling for what they want and then give tips based on that knowledge – it is part of *“our customer service [i.e., our job] but is something tourists appreciate”*. Information centre staff know that tourists appreciate their more personal recommendations – *“so you tell them about a really nice cafe you went to last time you were in the destination they are going to, or tell them to ask the staff (by name) at the local i-SITE for good local advice, or where to get the best breakfast – those local ideas that you can’t get off the internet”*; albeit described in business terms as a ‘value-add’.

4.6 Educating tourists

According to i-SITE staff, tourists commonly *“don’t know what they need to ask”* and, rather than just responding to the questions they are asked, many frontline staff also take responsibility for telling tourists the things they *“need to know”*. This includes information about weather conditions, the need to book some activities or accommodation in advance, and driving information and tips. Some information, however, is only needed at the start of a tourist’s trip.

Campervan rental companies, for example, often recommend that after arriving in Christchurch, tourists are best to only drive as far as Akaroa for their first night’s stay. Akaroa is a short drive and gives *“good practice on the types of winding hill roads they are likely to encounter in the South Island and allows them some time to recover from jet lag”*. A consequence of this is that holiday park operators in places like Akaroa then find they have to help tourists familiarise themselves with the functional aspects of their campervan (e.g., plugging in the electric connections, emptying the waste, and so on).

Many international tourists expect that driving in New Zealand will be the same as at home – e.g., that they will be able to travel over short distances in relatively quick time – which in New Zealand is not the case because of winding and often narrow roads. Common advice, with respect to driving in New Zealand, included:

- Suggesting that tourists get to where they are going before it gets dark;
- Telling tourists that it is not a good idea to drive from Hanmer Springs to Franz Josef at 5pm;
- Tell tourists going on the inland route to Kaikoura to allow plenty of time, as there is nowhere to pass and there can be slow vehicles – especially important if the tourists have Whale Watch booked;
- Rental vehicle companies tell tourists that, although the distances between places might not be great, it will take longer than they think; and,
- In the words of one i-SITE respondent, *“Try and give them good advice to match their driving skills, which you have to question sometimes – we don’t directly ask that, but we try to find out”*.

Encouraging tourists to be ‘flexible’ with their plans was also important. This included telling them that some destinations (e.g., Aoraki/Mt Cook) have limited accommodation availability or that they may have to book accommodation and activities in advance because of limited space or particularly busy times in many destinations. International tourists do not always appreciate that certain destinations can be busy with domestic visitors during school holidays and at weekends (e.g., *“pamper packs are not always available in Hanmer Springs on weekends when there are many domestic tourists here”*). Also, in smaller towns it does not take much to fill the available accommodation when there are special events on. Although many tourists understand that it will be busier during the school holidays, they often do not realise that the busy tourist season extends well past the end of January when schools recommence. Often, tourists staying with New Zealanders are poorly informed in this regard (i.e., their New Zealand hosts also do not understand how busy some tourist destinations can get).

Frontline staff often *“think ahead”* on behalf of their visitors or guests to ensure that they do not miss out on activities they are interested in. They also have strategies in place to make booking decisions as ‘easy’ as possible for tourists. The Hanmer Springs i-SITE staff, for example, are proactive *“on the Kaikoura Whale Watch [bookings] – over the summer it is very busy and heavily booked and they [tourists] can pre-book here without any penalty – they don’t have to pay”*. All frontline staff in Kaikoura are proactive about telling tourists what else they might need to know about the destination’s activities and attractions:

- It is only possible to access the Kaikoura seal colony at low tide;
- The Kaikoura headland walk is much more exposed than in Kaikoura itself and adequate clothing is needed – if a tourist is wearing only a t-shirt they tell them this;
- Tourists don’t understand that flat water in-shore does not always reflect water conditions further out (e.g., for Whale Watch trips); and,
- *“Stressing that the dolphins is a weather dependent tour – you are playing with Mother Nature – it is not a show”*.

While many accommodation operators display the local weather forecast for their guests, and are asked about the weather a lot, it is a common perception that international tourists do not understand New Zealand weather conditions, particularly the speed at which conditions can change in mountain areas. As one Hanmer Springs accommodation operator noted, *“Once I know what tourists’ plans are [where they are heading] it is sometimes necessary to inform them about the weather – people from European countries do not realise how much the weather can change over a few kilometres – this is particularly the case, for example, if they are going to the Glaciers or the West Coast from here”*. Another respondent noted that they always tell tourists about bad weather forecasts, even if it means guests leave earlier than planned, because *“it is more important that they enjoy what they are here for than you making more money out of them”*. Others reported that they *“try to get tourists to allow enough time in places like Kaikoura in case the weather does not allow*

them to do Whale Watch or dolphin swimming when they want to – don't want tourists to be disappointed".

Many i-SITE staff also think that tourists do not always understand New Zealand weather conditions, particularly in respect of rapid changes in the weather and the speed at which rivers can rise. The Hanmer Springs i-SITE staff, for example, may sometimes have to *"be a little tough with tourists and tell them they 'can't walk up Mt Isobel today' – when of course there is nothing to stop them doing so – but you really have to tell them it is a mountain and that there is no cell phone cover and it is too windy"*. Also, they find that a lot of tourists read about walks in the Lonely Planet guidebook (which make things sound easy) whereas the reality is often different. The Christchurch i-SITE respondent noted that tourists *"don't always understand the climatic variations in New Zealand – like Arthur's Pass is quite often wet and it is mostly wilderness walks and there is not much else there – you can't drink coffee all day. You don't want to scare them [tourists] but to prepare them for possibly the worst possible scenario"*.

Often, frontline staff *"go through a kind of checklist on what they [tourists] need to know"* which covers many things tourists might not realise and *"need to be told"*. That might be where the best or last place to get petrol is, or where they are best to get groceries (for price and selection) if there are no shops *en route* to a particular destination. Because the Geraldine i-SITE do a lot of bookings for Milford Sound, for example, they use a map put out by *Real Journeys* which shows not only *"the great things they [tourists] can see on the way but it also it tells them about the petrol and the wait at the Homer Tunnel"*. While often the i-SITE staff write things down for tourists they also find that some tourists are so pedantic that they write things down that are already printed on the map. One information centre respondent commented that *"I am concerned that sometimes I tell them [tourists] too much, but I would rather they left here knowing more than they wanted to know and think 'oh she did mention that' than have them say 'she was useless'"*.

Frontline tourism staff employ a range of approaches in their work, both to make their jobs easier and to improve the experience for tourists. This involves making considerable effort to learn about tourists' interests, experience and abilities. Customer service strategies are employed to ensure that this is done as effectively as possible in order to save staff time. Tourists are often unaware of both the amount of information they are sharing and of the amount of help they are being given.

Chapter 5

Tourist Decision Making Behaviour

As noted, the types of decisions each frontline tourism provider deals with also varies, with i-SITE and information centres covering a wider range than accommodation or activity providers; there are also some differences in this by destination. The following section reports respondents' perceptions of tourists' decision making with respect to the types of decision being made (i.e., itineraries and transport, accommodation and activities), and two factors which influence decisions (budget and the weather).

5.1 Itineraries & transport

Information centre staff and transport operators are more often asked for itinerary help than are accommodation or activity operators, although this is also related in part to the location of the i-SITE and the stage of trip at which tourists encounter them (i.e., this occurs more often in gateway locations such as Christchurch).

The Christchurch Airport i-SITE, and to a lesser extent, the Christchurch City i-SITE also field more questions on transport options that might best facilitate particular itineraries, budgets, types of tourists or travel groups. Transport sales contribute a substantial proportion of the Airport i-SITE's financial revenue and the i-SITE deals with rental vehicle bookings, as well as selling tickets for public transport. First time visitors might not know what the public transport options are for getting to their next destination and there is an expectation by many European tourists that the train services are a lot more thorough than is the case. They *"hand out the free AA maps – which are as good as maps they can buy – with all the main roads in New Zealand and they [tourists] look at them and are not so sure they have everything on them"*. The Airport i-SITE deals with four or five campervan or car rental requests a day in the summer, which can be difficult as vehicles are not always readily available. With over half of their market being backpackers looking for the *"best competitive rates"*, they also find that they have to telephone several companies to establish the best rates available. The i-SITE works with a range of second-tier car rental companies, partly because they offer cheaper rates, but also because they are more likely than the first-tier companies to have vehicles available. They also attribute the tendency not to book in advance to the long-haul backpacker market; these backpackers are *"often confident and experienced travellers – although not necessarily in respect of New Zealand – by the time they reach New Zealand"*. The Christchurch i-SITE respondent noted that, *"for tourists coming for a long time, how they travel around is one of the biggest decisions they have to make and they may not make it then and there on the spot – personally I like to invest time with people – because it is hard to research that stuff and I also talk about what accommodation options they could use associated with transport"*.

While most campervan tourists have pre-booked their vehicles, some do not have an itinerary planned and seek help with this when they pick up their vehicle. Campervan rental company staff find that even those who have pre-planned an itinerary based around a number of 'key' destinations (Queenstown, Tekapo, the West Coast, Milford Sound) still seek advice on 'special' places in New Zealand that are *"not in the guidebooks"*. The staff in the Christchurch i-SITE might ask tourists what the 'highlight' of their New Zealand trip is and then recommend that they *"leave it for later in their trip and gradually build up to it rather than going there on day one or two"*.

Accommodation providers are more likely to be asked for advice on alternative (if available) routes to a tourist's next destination, or about places they might stop along the way and have a range of responses to this. Where alternative routes are possible (e.g., between Kaikoura and Hanmer

Springs) accommodation operators often describe the options in terms of scenery, comfort and driving time or give useful *en route* information (e.g., about a good 'halfway point' for taking a break, or the location of interesting features or stopping places along the way). Some also made an effort to find out where tourists had already been so that they could then direct them on the route to the next destination which offered different scenery to what they might have already experienced. At the other extreme, however, one accommodation operator noted that *"When people ask advice on routes you can just 'spin a yarn', as any way [that they might go] is OK and tourists will be happy with all options"*. Others thought that tourists *"just follow their nose to a certain degree"* and that they do not need much help with travel routes.

5.2 Accommodation

Different types of accommodation offer varying degrees of personal engagement between hosts and guests, as well as attracting different types of tourists; these differences, in turn, reflect the differences in the amount and type of help and advice sought by and offered to tourists. Broadly speaking, accommodation options occur on an 'engagement' spectrum with hotels at the lower engagement extreme and backpackers at the higher. A range of factors – number of guests, facility structure and design, formality, type of guests, experience and role of staff – help determine an accommodation's position on this spectrum. The degree of personal engagement of different accommodation operators was reflected in both the amount of interview time they spent describing their guests, and in the amount of help they reported giving their guests. As noted earlier, this help was commonly in respect of local attractions, and to a lesser extent onward travel routes. Some accommodation providers also 'helped' tourists select (and book) their onward accommodation.

Hotels tend to attract older clientele, who may be on a budget holiday and making their own plans but are *"not prepared to rough it entirely"*. While only two hotels were included in this research the frontline staff interviewed appeared to have less interest in helping tourists – i.e., they were both more dismissive of the need to help tourists, and were less active about giving it (e.g., had fewer brochures on display, were more likely to refer people to the local i-SITE). This may be because they have more differentiated positions and roles within the hotel staffing structure, although some staff members do spend more time and have more personal interaction with their guests than others.

Motels offer a less structured experience than hotels; as one respondent commented, *"even though guests may still get their bags carried up the stairs for them they get a more personal experience in which they are seeing the same face each day, rather than just [seeing] 'staff'"*. When advising tourists about onward accommodation, moteliers tend to direct tourists within their own star rating band. Some moteliers saw themselves as the only accommodation option offering a *"negotiable price"*, suggesting that they were asked for discounted rates at times. Although motel hosts generally offered a more 'personal' service than hotel hosts, they do not get quite as involved with their guests as the hosts in backpackers or holiday parks. Backpackers, in particular, seem to attract hosts who have themselves spent a considerable amount of time backpacking.

Staying at backpacker accommodation involves more interaction with both the accommodation host and the other guests. As a consequence, backpacker hosts often actively direct their guests (or potential guests) towards what they deem to be the most suitable or appropriate backpackers for that person. Backpacker hosts are keenly aware of their hostel 'type' and of who their typical guests are. The hostels in the YHA network, for example, attract more Asian tourists because they are familiar with the YHA brand (from their own countries) and trust it; they also offer single sex dorms which Asian tourists are more comfortable with. Independent hostel owners see YHA as attracting less adventurous, older, more old-fashioned tourists who tend to stay within the YHA network whenever possible.

Independent hostels vary in both size and in the type of guests they attract – characteristics that are sometimes connected in the case of the larger hostels which regularly accommodate tourists travelling on the hop-on hop-off bus tours such as Kiwi Experience and Magic Bus. As a consequence, hosts in these backpackers would not encourage families to stay as it does not provide *“the right mix of people”*. One backpacker host noted that, *“other guests can be put-off by particular types of guests – like Kiwi Experience and Israelis”*. The hosts of smaller, quieter backpackers often suggest to younger, more party-oriented guests that they might ‘prefer’ a larger backpacker hostel in their next destination. Often price is also a consideration and many tourists ask if hostels belong to the BBH network (which gives members a discounted accommodation rate); those who did not belong were often competitive anyway, but had to convince tourists of this. Several of the backpacker hosts interviewed had previously belonged to the BBH, but had withdrawn because they had found the cost of membership high in respect of the benefits they got. In addition, bookings via the internet had increased considerably and, if signed up to a hostel booking service, were easier and less time consuming to manage in a practical sense.

If tourists are choosing a backpacker accommodation option once they reach a destination, both functional and aesthetic factors inform their decision. The Lakefront Backpackers in Tekapo, for example, *“looks great and is highly visible to people going to the Hot Pools, which also showcases its great location”*. Because many tourists staying in backpacker accommodation travel by public transport and tend to do their own cooking for budgetary reasons, they often prefer centrally located hostels as they *“don’t want to have to walk far and want to support the local supermarket”*.

Overall, there appears to be more consideration given by frontline staff with regard to which backpacker accommodation was the most suitable for particular tourists; a consideration which did not feature with regard to other forms of accommodation. This is possibly because of the more communal nature of backpacker accommodation within which it is often more noticeable when particular guests do not ‘fit’. There are also far greater variations in tourist behaviour reported in backpacker accommodation (e.g., compared to those who stay in motels) and by tourists who use this type of accommodation in general. The more personal ambiance of smaller hostels encourages tourists to congregate in/spend time in the hostel. In contrast, larger hostels are more *“just a place to sleep”*. Some tourists staying at backpackers have a lot of time available for travel (e.g., working holidaymakers). Most backpacker hosts consider backpacker tourists to be very well-informed on what there is on offer in different destinations – through talking to other tourists or from guidebooks – although there was some concern that *“those staying in backpackers are only interested in what they can do for free”*.

The holiday park hosts interviewed had less to say about their guests. They are, however, aware of the *“quality”* and experience of their guests – e.g., *“holiday parks do not get top echelon people – not 5 stars – but we get people in campervans who know what they are doing”*. They see themselves as having an advantage over other types of accommodation as they can offer a range of different price options (e.g., tent sites, cabins, motel units). Holiday parks also offer a very personal service to their guests – they spend a lot of time ‘chatting’ to them around camp – and take care to direct tourists to other ‘suitable’ parks (e.g., in other locations or in their own destination if they are full). The primary ‘suitability’ consideration was for tourists travelling with children, and holiday parks are often categorised according to how *“family-friendly”* they are.

The accommodation questions asked in i-SITEs and information centres are more generic – i.e., the staff must first establish what type of accommodation is the most suitable before selecting specific premises. Sometimes tourists (especially new arrivals) do not understand what the different accommodation options are like. Tourists from the UK – who, because they are familiar with this type of accommodation, often express a preference for Bed and Breakfast – for example, do not realise that New Zealand motels offer a high standard of accommodation with good facilities for a

much better price. If tourists are coming from Australia they might not realise that backpacker accommodation in New Zealand is of a higher quality. The Christchurch i-SITE respondent commented that, *“being a gateway like we are, if we educate tourists about the various accommodation options, then the people in the Hanmer Springs and the Kaikouras might not have to do it”*. Some backpacker hosts, however, also reported that *“less experienced travellers”* do not always understand what facilities they offer – e.g., *“they ask if they can cook in the kitchen, if they can use the fridge”*.

Accommodation suitability might be based on the number of travellers, what type of accommodation they like, what price they expect to pay, how long they plan to stay, what is available – so it *“involves learning about the people and then matching them to the right sort of accommodation”*. Sometimes they might advise tourists who appear *“fussy”* to go and have a look at the accommodation before deciding – i-SITEs have a referral system whereby they still get their commission if the tourists subsequently decide to stay in that accommodation. Some i-SITE staff reported that tourists always think they will find a better accommodation deal if they go themselves – particularly the case with *“males and English (and other Europeans)”* – but they start to *“accept advice when they find that places are full”*.

Information centres would always promote their business partners and those businesses that pay to display their brochures first. Most i-SITEs deal with the mid- to lower-end of the tourist market. Often the base criterion is the star rating or standard of accommodation, but within this they might also ask if a *“tourist wants somewhere modern or do they mind something that is a little old fashioned at a cheaper price”*. The Tekapo i-SITE staff find that around 95% of tourists want a ‘view’ of the lake (which relatively few accommodation options offer), but are usually satisfied with it being *“just outside the door and only five minutes’ walk away”*. In a compact destination like Hanmer Springs, i-SITE staff find it *“easier to sell tourists accommodation that is 600 metres away from the centre over the phone – they think that is very close – than over the counter when they have driven past it and [see that] it is on the outskirts of the village”*. When telling tourists about holiday park options, i-SITE staff usually differentiate based on how ‘open’ or how far out in the country a holiday park is, or how close to restaurants; they also use local maps to show how far away each option is. The gateway i-SITEs tend not to sell much holiday park accommodation: *“they are the travellers who are making it up as they go along”*.

5.3 Activities

Frontline service providers employ a range of strategies to assist tourists with their attraction and activity decisions. In gateway destinations, tourist itineraries are often ‘built’ around the attraction or activities they have pre-selected or researched; frontline staff simply help tourists to ‘connect the dots’ on these. Those that encounter tourists later in their trips recognise that tourists have already done some activities and as a consequence need to, *“suss out what people are interested in: what they have done so far?; how long they have been in New Zealand?; where else they have been?; where they are from?”*. Some noted that, with experience, you can *“be quite good at it”* (i.e., finding out about the tourists), but then the tourists will ask *“what do you think we should do?”* The addition of this final question then necessitates finding out more personal information about the tourist, and as the quotation above indicated, nationality was seen as important in this regard. As one i-SITE respondent noted *“we always ask people what country they are from. It gives us an idea what they will be interested in – to a lesser extent their age also has an impact, but virtually 100% of Israelis will want to do walks and won’t want to spend money and you have to know everything they ask about”*.

When finding out what activities interest a tourist, how active they are and how long they either have, or want, to spend doing something are common questions asked by frontline staff. According to one accommodation operator, tourists’ expectations vary and *“sometimes the hype of an activity*

makes them think they [are] going on a wonderful one-off thing and then it doesn't meet their expectation". One Kaikoura accommodation provider commented that they *"suggest that tourists go watch [a] video of Whale Watch first – to ensure it is [the] right activity for them"*. Another noted that *"tourists can be a bit naive about the nature of some activities – like not realising how rough the ocean can be"*. Accommodation providers are not under the same amount of pressure to push activities as are i-SITEs, who earn commission through bookings.

Activity operators are often quite proactive in telling tourists what they will be doing, e.g., *"we put it all together [a day's activities] and ask what that sounds like – they do need help – if they are doing a novelty thing they need you to plan it for them"*. While activity operators recognise that *"different tourists get a buzz from different things"* most frontline service providers have some 'universals' that they think appeal to the majority of tourists; Queenstown, Milford Sound and the Glaciers were given as examples in every interview (although these are actually destinations offering multiple activities they were discussed as if they represented a single activity). Together, the appeal of any destination is made up of a combination of attractions and activities. The activity operators themselves reflected more on the service they provided for tourists who tried new activities (with the novelty itself being part of the attraction); they help tourists 'new' to an activity by reassuring them that they will help them with it. They also find that they have to *"warm people into the idea of doing something, like on a grey day you might tell them that quad biking is fun in the rain, the track is more lively, that we provide all the gear and that they won't get cold"*; they also offer free pictures which both attract tourists and give the company 'free' marketing. It was generally considered that *"if tourists have a great time they will tell others about it"*.

A number of other factors also appear to impact on the appeal of, and tourists' participation in, particular activities. Activity operators, for example, find that *"being able to do activities as a group appeals to a lot of people because they get support in a group"*. Signage is important as tourists might get to a destination with their mind set on doing the key activity (e.g., the hot pools in Hanmer) and then, once in that destination, they look around and see what else is on offer. When asked to recommend particular eating establishments, frontline service providers also asked tourists a variety of questions to establish what type of food they liked or felt like eating, whether it was a special occasion, how much time they had, and who was in their travel party, and so on.

Tourists do not always know what there is to do in a particular destination (*"the role of the frontline staff is to tell them what is possible"*) but once they find out what is available they are reasonably quick to decide what they want to do. One accommodation provider, however, thought that *"tourists don't really want to have too much information prior to doing something"* but will sometimes seek reassurance afterwards that they have made a good decision, often asking their accommodation provider after they have done something (e.g. they will say *"we did this, what do you think?"*).

Having referral systems in place for activities that are likely to be weather affected is helpful for the i-SITE staff as tourists are more prepared to book in advance if they do not have to pay 'upfront'. Tourists often think they will get a better deal on an activity if they book it direct and it is *"up to the i-SITE staff to tell them it won't cost them any more to book through them"*. Some tourists take longer (to decide what they are going to do) if it is a decision on how to spend money (especially for the cheaper backpacker end of the market): *"The young ones know they can only afford to do one expensive activity and they have already picked it"*. The length of time between making this decision and actually participating in the chosen activity will then vary depending on the stage of trip at which the tourist encounters the activity.

'Money' and the 'weather' were two key factors that featured strongly when respondents talked about the decisions tourists were making, and these are discussed separately below.

5.4 Budget

Although both activity participation and eating out were perceived to be *“price driven”*, asking outright questions about ‘budget’ was usually avoided when questioning tourists about their preferences. Price, however, was perceived to be a key driver of accommodation choice and participation in activities. This was thought to be particularly the case for those activities that were *“not the likes of Milford Sound or Doubtful Sound – they are top of the list and that is what they are going to do and everything else is juggling around that”*. There was, however, some variation in what impact price had on tourists’ decision making and behaviour:

- *“People are price-oriented – [there is] a price around which they are prepared to pay”;*
- *“They might shout themselves something [expensive] as a treat”;*
- *“If it is their last night tourists are not so worried about the cost of meals out”;*
- *“Young girls travelling together have to work out schedule, young guys their budget”;*
- *“Novelty of experience rather than price drives tourists”;* and,
- *“Tourists never have a ‘blank canvas’ – and are driven by price in their choices”.*

The variation related to the types of tourists, stage of their trip, gender, what type of decision they were making and their motives for travel. Also, one accommodation provider noted that, *“tourists might have some scope to decide on accommodation based on the amenities on offer, but have a price (both in mind and relatively fixed) before hitting town”*. Generally, accommodation is the one aspect of the tourists’ budget that i-SITE staff are comfortable about asking direct questions. One of the activity operators commented that *“price might initially put tourists off an activity, but they can be ‘talked around’ with an explanation of what they will get for their money”*. Another respondent noted the importance to tourists of getting *“value for money”*.

There was some comment on the impact of the recession on tourists’ spending. In Akaroa, for example, Bed and Breakfast owners have reported to the information centre staff that more people are just *“sitting around in their accommodation, rather than going out and doing things”*. A number of backpacker hosts interviewed also commented that their guests did less than in the past, although there was general consensus that a *“lot of people want to do things that don’t cost anything”*.

5.5 The weather

The Christchurch airport i-SITE staff are asked most days about the weather around the country or the weather in Christchurch. Many accommodation providers and all information centres either display a weather forecast or are prepared to show tourists a forecast on the internet. In coastal locations the weather, sea conditions and tidal information are important facilitators for tourist activities (see Photos 6 & 7). In addition to its impact on tourists’ participation in activities, the weather also impacts on their decision making and general behaviour in destinations as the following examples show:

- Most tourists are quick to do things if the weather is good – i.e., they take advantage of it (which suggests that they realise this might not always be the case);
- If the weather is bad, they arrive at their accommodation earlier – if the weather is good, they are more likely to do some activities before looking for accommodation or before checking-in; and,
- If there is an activity they really want to do (such as star gazing in Tekapo) they may stay longer than originally intended until conditions are suitable.

A number of comments were made regarding tourists’ expectations of the weather. One accommodation provider noted, for example, that *“if it is raining when tourists arrive they ask if it*

accommodation providers a tourist's 'fit' with other guests was important. Decision making in respect of activities was facilitated as much by informed and balanced advice (often given in order to temper hype and expectation) as it was by practical information and the use of tourist-friendly booking systems. The ways in which frontline service providers described tourist decision making, suggested that rather than seeing all tourists as being the same, the reality was that they often categorised the tourists they were dealing with; this is examined further in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Types of Tourists

One of the key findings from the earlier tourist interviews was that the tourist's type of trip was a primary determinant of travel behaviour and decision making approach. The types of trips identified were seeing/doing New Zealand, VFR, holiday/family, working holiday, RTW and other – more detail of these can be found in Moore et al. (2009). Type of trip was locked in prior to arrival in New Zealand and framed a wide range of travel characteristics (e.g., transport, length of stay, accommodation, etc.) and decision making processes (e.g., when, where, and with whom decisions related to travel in New Zealand were made). Apart from an occasional reference to the different types of tourists they encountered (e.g., the family-friendly needs of some), these categories did not feature strongly in the interviews with frontline tourism operators.

When asked a direct question about encountering different types of tourists most respondents denied categorising tourists in any way, although many then went on to do so; differentiating factors included budget, age, travel group, nationality and travel experience. As one respondent admitted, *"I do categorise tourists – it is hard not to – but they are all asking the same questions and looking for the same answers even if the people vary"*. Another respondent noted that they *"just give all tourists information"*. Many of the i-SITE respondents noted, however, that they only saw those tourists *"who need to know something"* and that usually they did not see tourists at the *"high end of the market"* or those travelling around New Zealand in the company of New Zealanders. While accommodation, activity and transport providers often engage with tourists who do not visit i-SITES they also encounter a more limited range of tourist types. Overall, most respondents considered tourists to be very similar in respect of the type of information they both required and asked for. There were some differences, however, in respect of how informed tourists were and how much help they needed.

6.1 Categorising tourists

The majority of respondents reported that they try not to categorise tourists without knowing *"a bit about them"*. They also admitted to being able to *"tell some things about them from their clothes, the kind of car they drive"*. Others admitted to subconsciously categorising tourists – *"look at them and decide what they will do"*. This was commonly either budget-related (e.g., a Tekapo accommodation provider deciding that a particular tourist would not be likely to do an (expensive) scenic flight), or based on what tourists ask (e.g., according to one accommodation provider *"if the first question is 'how much?' I know exactly what type of people they are going to be"*). Another said that they *"never ask [tourists] what they want to spend – [but you] can tell a lot about them from their attitude"*.

Some respondents had a clear idea of what types of activity are suitable for different types of tourists in their destination and *"can sort them by looking"* e.g., in Hanmer Springs *"farm park for people with kids, coffee/shopping/pools for older people"*. Age was commonly employed to differentiate tourists' interests and abilities, their budgets and what they were like to deal with. Having children in the travel group also had an impact:

- *"Younger generation will go dolphin swimming, middle- to late-generation on Whale Watch";*
- *"Young tourists do what they want (i.e., don't take advice but do look for reassurance), middle-age ones are the best, better than old ones";*
- *"Younger tourists often can't get their head around the fact that you can't do everything in one day";*

- *“Age and the way tourists are dressed tells you what they are interested in – but you do have to ask as well”; and,*
- *“If they have children [you] have to think about what a family might like to do”.*

The main differences perceived by many respondents related to how much time it took to deal with tourists. Some i-SITE staff reported that it is either the older generation (*“retired people who like to talk about their life”*) or new arrivals (*“who haven’t really got an itinerary in their heads”*) who take up the most time. In the case of new arrivals, it can be time consuming getting to an accommodation decision as they sometimes have *“an unrealistic idea of what things actually cost”*. A hotel operator also noted that *“more seasoned travellers are ‘more prepared’ [i.e., take up less time] and you can tell that by the types of questions they ask – [we] take cues from people that they often stay in hotels [and therefore know how the system works and what the hotel provides]”*. A similar comment was made by one of the holiday park operators who found that it takes a lot longer to check tourists into accommodation early in their trip (as they did not know the procedure and had to go outside to look at their vehicle registration), whereas after a few days they would have learned these.

Nationality was also used to describe variations in what different ‘types’ of tourists were like to deal with:

- *“The Israelis are the worst customers, the English complain the most, the Japanese are always quiet”;*
- *“Americans tend to ask everything at once”;*
- *“Americans and Israelis [are] more demanding, others [are] more laid back”;*
- *“Some nationalities are grumpier than others”;*
- *“Some tourists are more demanding than others – Asians the hardest and Australians the easiest to please, and Indians second most difficult – but for different reasons – the Indians leave [motel] units in bad shape, whereas Asians cram people into units”;* and,
- One Hanmer Springs respondent noted that she *“tends to categorise into age, rather than nationality”*, but then went on to say that *“Germans are more structured and Asians happy to just cruise”*.

Nationality was also perceived to impact on what a tourist might be interested in and their general travel behaviour (e.g., *“All tourists coming to Kaikoura will be for the whales except the Japanese – but they [the Japanese] like the seals”*). In terms of general travel behaviour, Asian cultures are seen as not being as adventurous as some others (preferring soft adventure). One of the activity operators commented that Asians and Indians, for example, are *“likely to turn up places later in day, or on day trips, and are harder to deal with because they are less well-informed about the need to book trips”*. Also, the Chinese market is perceived to be *“looking for good quality accommodation”*.

One respondent noted that *“we need to understand the cultures of the tourists so we know why they behave the way they do”*. Another respondent commented that *“we [in New Zealand] have a tendency to say that somewhere is just down the road”*, but a German tourist will want to know exactly how far, so *“you learn to speak their way”*. While one respondent noted that it was also possible to tell tourists’ ethnicity from the way they looked or the way they were dressed, others were cautious about making assumptions based on the ‘look’ of a tourist.

Some i-SITE staff were of the opinion that Asian tourists were more likely to be interested in visiting Queenstown and Milford Sound (the iconic destinations), but often do so within very rushed stays. In contrast, older tourists and Australians are *“doing it at a more a more leisurely pace or picking an area to visit rather than trying to do heaps all at once”* – first time Australian visitors, however, will *“do as much as they can”*. Some thought that all tourists want to see everything and that the only ones for whom this did not apply were Australians, for whom New Zealand not as ‘new’ as for

Europeans. Australians also tend to be holiday makers (rather than 'touring' tourists) and to travel in family groups. This picture of Australian tourists is in accordance with the findings from the earlier tourist interviews, in which over half the holiday/family groups sampled were from Australia and did not travel as extensively as sightseeing tourists.

Overall, repeat tourists know *"more about where they want to go and have a clearer idea of what they want"*. They were also described as being *"more easy-going"* and more *"spur of the moment"*. According to information centre staff, however, repeat visitors may have visited a long time ago and many things may have changed since that visit. Often, repeat visitors also have a personal connection to New Zealand, and their New Zealand hosts may have significant input into their travel planning and decision making. The tourist interview data showed that VFR tourists could be defined as having either strong, moderate or weak VFR connections: strong VFR tourists spent most of their time with their hosts (including travelling with them); while moderate VFR tourists spent less time with their hosts, they either planned a significant portion of their trip either with the help of their hosts or to include their hosts; weak VFR tourists had some connection in New Zealand, but this had little impact on their ongoing travel arrangements. Tourists travelling with New Zealanders or sent out by New Zealanders are often given the wrong information. This represents an important caveat to the earlier finding that tourists relied on advice from New Zealanders who they had visited or who were in their group (Moore et al., 2009). Such local advice, while overwhelmingly trusted, can be misleading.

As noted earlier, providing useful information involved finding out a considerable amount of information about the tourists themselves. As one i-SITE respondent noted, *"you try and do an assessment and ask tourists what they like – their personality type, what they have liked previously, what their family component is"*. Other differentiation was made based on gender (i.e., *"Hanmer Springs has pampering for females and general pool experience for males"*) or personality type (*"some people want to be left on their own and others are happy to have a chat"*).

There were also some distinctions made to differentiate types of tourists within what is generally considered to be a homogenous tourist group such as backpackers. One respondent, for example, made a clear distinction between those backpackers who *"love the hustle and bustle of Queenstown and others who hate it"* and suggested that, for the latter group, *"Wanaka offers something different"*. Another offered an unprompted description of the backpacker 'types' they encounter – based on differences in their interests, budgets and decision making behaviour – which fit well with the type of trip classification identified in the earlier research (Moore et al., 2009):

- *"We have the standard backpacker – between 18 and 25 years old, and on their own, or maybe with another, but who they meet here – they are in general pretty easy-going, don't expect much, don't have too much money to spend, just want to check out places and they also don't tend to book much – they just arrive when it suits them, will take any bed;*
- *Sometimes people travelling the world or on a working holiday fit that same category – we get a lot of working holiday people (or doing the WWOOF);*
- *Then there are the Europeans, or Israelis, or American people, who have a bigger budget, but only stay a month or six weeks and those are the kind who like the more luxury rooms and they have the money to go out for dinner and do many things;*
- *Then the domestic market (who I also consider the Australians) and the families who will go to the pools – easy guests to have, quite a few regulars; and,*
- *And then the odd types – all the rest – they can be very colourful people – sometimes older people travelling on their own, but still doing backpacker type of things – a little bit like tramps".*

The majority of respondents had worked in the New Zealand tourism sector for many years and a number of comments were made about ways it was changing. Changes in both the types of tourists

and the ways they researched, planned, booked and used information impacted on frontline service providers. These emerging markets and the use of new technologies are described next.

6.2 Emerging markets

The respondents from the gateway i-SITEs (i.e., Christchurch Airport and Christchurch City) noted changes in the types of tourists to New Zealand, particularly the increases from emerging Asian markets associated with the advent of air services from low cost airlines such as AirAsia X. The tourists arriving on these flights are perceived to be less-well informed and less experienced tourists and to have little organised on the ground. As one respondent noted, *“they have grabbed a bargain, flown in, and are almost like, ‘where am I?’”*. While these new tourists generate considerable business for the i-SITEs (*“they are pure FIT³ so they often haven’t booked much in advance”*) they are also less knowledgeable and require more help: *“they will have heard of Queenstown and want to go south and they think they can get down there in a couple of hours”*. The Airport i-SITE staff estimate that they help around 40-50 people (out of 380 passengers) on each of these flights and find that *“the AirAsia X passengers love brochures and bombard our site – it is because they don’t have the information before they arrive”*.

Even if they have pre-planned their itinerary and booked accommodation the i-SITE staff might still influence their plans: *“some [Asians] the other day came in late in the afternoon and were planning to drive through to Franz Josef that night. The next day they were going to do a full glacier tour and that night drive to Queenstown – and again they had booked their accommodation, but hadn’t thought about the distance between – I changed their full itinerary and rang around the hotels – they had to forfeit one night, but I convinced them that was the best [thing to do]”*. Some of the accommodation providers in Tekapo also reported that the biggest change they had seen was the Malays – *“they just drive up with no advance booking, often having arrived in Christchurch mid-afternoon and don’t arrive here until 10 or 11 at night”*. The majority of tourists arriving on these flights are Asian and are not familiar with New Zealand roads and this is of some concern to many of the frontline staff who encounter them.

Another change in the New Zealand tourist market has been an increase in the numbers arriving on cruise ships and the respondent from the Akaroa information centre noted that the cruise ship passengers are *“becoming more savvy about paying for things on board”*: a result of this is that on-shore services such as those provided by the information centre and local activity operators are both busier and see greater financial benefits.

6.3 Technology use

Many respondents also noted changes in the traditional methods of travel planning and booking behaviour as a result of increased internet use by tourists. Some of the i-SITE and information centre staff members interviewed reported receiving increasing numbers of pre-trip internet enquiries. Accommodation providers (particularly backpackers) also receive a considerable number of email enquiries. The use of internet to actually book accommodation and activities, however, varied considerably:

- There was a perception that many tourists still preferred to use the internet for general research, preferring to ask for more detailed information in person;

3 Fully Independent Travellers

- People might look for information and book on the internet, but often don't want to pay their money up front; and,
- Several respondents also noted that, while they are travelling, tourists still prefer phone contact to the internet, as they get an immediate answer.

There is a perception by tourists that they can get things cheaper "*doing it themselves*" on the internet and i-SITE staff find themselves having to convince tourists that they can book things for the same price. They also reported that a lot of people are disappointed with what they book on the internet. Although most internet research is undertaken pre-trip, increasing numbers of tourists are also travelling with mobile devices that enable instant connection to the internet; i-SITE staff report that tourists will sometimes immediately 'double-check' the information they are given. The availability of free wireless in many places and the increasing use of iPhones & iPads to source information whilst travelling – rather than simply as a communication tool – offers tourists instant information with "*visuals*" which is very important. There are, however, some differences in the type of interaction and information seeking tourists are comfortable with (e.g., "*older people still prefer to talk while younger ones prefer to sit at a computer*").

Overall, changes in the use of technology has altered the lead-in time for bookings and made it easier for tourists to manage their own arrangements; this ease makes people more confident about doing their own bookings and getting the best deals. The number of accommodation bookings i-SITES and information centres are called on to make are getting fewer and fewer because of the internet. In order to manage their own bookings, accommodation providers (and tourists) prefer "*easy to use*" internet systems.

Using online booking systems reduces the time accommodation providers have to spend managing their reservations, although one respondent noted that "*the hardest thing with internet bookings is meeting people's expectations*". Tourists who book motels on the internet might use star ratings (e.g., Qualmark), but if they are doing it on the spot it is "*location and price*". Some accommodation providers reported that even when people have booked in advance on the internet, they always make them "*go and look at what the units are like*" before making a final decision on their accommodation choice.

While some respondents attributed increasing internet use to the increasing maturity of many tourist markets (i.e., with tourists from those markets being more experienced travellers), others suggested that tourists' own internet research does not always provide them with the best or most accurate or useful information. Ashburton i-SITE staff often deal with tourists who have just arrived and who might have "*a partially-made itinerary that they have pulled off books and websites and we have to sit here and Google it to get on the same pages as they have – to see where they found their information from*". Part of the reason for doing this is to "*check that the tourists have the correct information*". Information centres also sometimes find that they have to change bookings and arrangements made via the internet: according to the Tekapo i-SITE, for example, "*independent tourists might book things online themselves, but then they come to us when they want help, or they want to change something, or there is a problem – they come to us to fix it*" and that it is "*good for them to know there is somewhere that people will help them*". Also, while tourists expect to find out about the 'key' things on the internet, there is a perception that the frontline service providers and other local people they encounter will be able to tell them "*what else is different about an accommodation option, activity/attraction or destination*".

The changing tourist markets and increasing use of the internet and technology whilst travelling by all tourists has begun to change the ways in which frontline staff interact with tourists and these changes will potentially increase in the future. Traditionally, frontline service staff have relied heavily on visual cues to categorise tourists although they recognise that appearances can be deceptive.

Again, while generally unbiased in their attitudes towards tourists there was a sense that many respondents had personal preferences for particular types of tourists. This was often related to how difficult they were to engage with, particularly in respect of how much of the frontline service provider's time they required. In this regard a tourist's prior travel experience is important – in terms of their overall travel experience and their experience of travel in New Zealand. Tourist's New Zealand travel experience related to both previous visitation and the stage of their current trip at which frontline service providers were likely to encounter them. This, in turn, was related to the spatial and temporal location of particular destinations on itineraries.

Chapter 7

The Destination

The earlier tourist research (Moore et al., 2009) found differences in what tourists in New Zealand do and where they go associated with the nature of different destinations, the geographic location of the destination and the type of trip tourists are on. Different destinations are also likely to be encountered at different stages of a tourist's trip.

There also appeared to be considerable reflection and comments made by frontline service providers with regard to the type of destination they represented and how those destinations were perceived by tourists. In Hanmer Springs, for example, *"international tourists are disappointed that the Hanmer Springs pools are not a nature experience, New Zealanders think Hanmer Springs will become a second Queenstown"*. Commonly, destinations were described in terms of how they compared to other (competing) destinations, the type of tourists they attract and the type of attractions or activities on offer as these examples of Hanmer Springs and Akaroa illustrate:

- *"Hanmer Springs gets two seasons – makes it different to Akaroa"* (which is perceived to be its competition);
- *"Hanmer Springs is either an active or passive place"* (suggesting that tourists are either one or the other);
- *"Hanmer Springs is more relaxing [than other places] because it is less commercial"* (i.e., it does not offer extensive shopping opportunities);
- *"Hanmer suits the tourists at the end of their trip, who just want to relax, rather than being on the road every day"*;
- *"Hanmer Springs does not offer elderly people much, for example, we do not have a museum or cultural centre"*;
- *"Akaroa does not really suit 25-year olds who want to party"*; and,
- *"Akaroa is a summer destination"*.

Destinations which attract fewer tour groups and more FIT tourists are perceived to offer tourists more 'personal' experiences – although this appeared at times to be an attempt by respondents to put a 'positive' spin on their destination being quieter (i.e., less popular) than other destinations. While attractions vary greatly between destinations, most frontline staff were of the opinion that the majority of international tourists give prominence in their trip planning and itineraries to the most iconic – and heavily marketed – destinations and attractions/activities within New Zealand. These were often explicitly 'paired' as in the case of Queenstown-bungy, Wanaka-sky dive and Kaikoura-Whale Watch.

The questions asked of frontline staff in destinations which do have a key attraction (or set of attractions), such as Whale Watch in Kaikoura, are much more focused (e.g., timing, location and price options for activities); in other destinations questions are much more open and generic (e.g., *"where can we go?; what can we do?"*). Also, frontline staff working in destinations that do not offer a wide range of activities are more likely to think that *"everyone is pretty much doing the same thing"*. While some locations are also more expensive than others – and tourists sometimes expect this – they need a 'reputation' (i.e., as iconic, having a unique or special attraction) to be able to charge tourists more.

Second- and third-tier destinations (i.e., those not on the 'must-do' list) are often recommended to tourists by other tourists. It is also common for frontline staff to tell tourists about things to see that are not obvious activities or attractions. One activity provider, for example, noted that even the

activity products they sold essentially just offered a means to explore and experience the scenery of the destination (although, as noted earlier, being a novel activity also helps sell it). Likewise, one of the Tekapo respondents liked to tell tourists planning to drive past Lake Pukaki to stop and, *“if the floodgates are open on the dam, walk down the hill and look as it is spectacular”*. Often, accommodation providers find that tourists come to them to try and find things that are not in the guidebooks and not so well known.

Destinations do not exist in isolation; often destination attractiveness extends beyond the immediate location where tourism services are provided e.g., tourism development and growth across the wider Waipara area helps to attract more people to Hanmer Springs. Also, while there was some agreement that it was important to have at least one ‘icon’ attraction (e.g., the hot pools in Hanmer Springs) it is also necessary to watch what happens in other places and to *“lift one’s game”* in the face of competition (e.g., Tekapo opening hot pools). The ability of less well-known locations to ‘capture’ tourists is affected by their location and *“what the town’s product people have to offer as well – we can only sell what is here and we try to give the business associations feedback on what is needed”*. Ashburton, for example, is perceived to have little to offer young families and while they have a museum, *“people don’t want a museums everyday of their holiday – they can get a bit museum-ed out”*. Timaru is in a similar itinerary position to Ashburton, attracting tourists who have little advance knowledge of it as a destination, but who might have some time to spare – particularly at the end of their trip. According to the Timaru i-SITE staff, however, *“once you put your thinking cap on there is a lot for people to do and it is good because most of our things are free”*; tourists *“like free things – especially at the end of their trip”*.

The opening of the hot pools contributed to Tekapo becoming more of a tourist ‘destination’ in its own right, rather than being just a traditional *“pee, pie and petrol stop”* between Christchurch and Queenstown. Tekapo now ‘looks’ more like a destination, with more people around (i.e., greater critical mass), more activity options, more products in supermarket, the upmarket Peppers Resort etc – *“the more things you have to hold people the better”*. Interestingly, while this has occurred in response to demand from domestic tourists (i.e., it was discussed in terms of *“Making sure we are ‘New Zealand-friendly’ type of place”* and in respect of *“a maturing domestic market”*) it appears to have also increased the attractiveness of Tekapo to the international market. Some considered Tekapo to be an ‘easy’ destination (as minimal effort was required to see the lake) while others thought Tekapo was difficult to promote because it offered *“not all that much to do – especially if people arrive late in the day when it is too dark to do a longer walk, or if the weather is not good enough for star gazing”*. For many locations it can be difficult to satisfy demand for activities people can do late in the day – i.e., which do not require a lot of time or daylight – especially when they arrive at a destination they only plan to stay one night at.

7.1 Destination location

A range of factors – geographic location, the stage of trip at which tourists encounter it, the type of tourists – contribute to a destination’s appeal. The high propensity for international tourists to ‘tour’ New Zealand and the geographic location of many destinations help determine the time at which tourists arrive (and depart) that particular location. The accommodation providers in Tekapo, for example, reported that tourists commonly arrive from around 3pm and depart before 10am the following morning. People working in tourism have a high awareness of their destination’s ‘position’ in these tourist flows. Tekapo, for example, fits *“nicely between Queenstown and Christchurch”* and provides *“a good (logical) overnight stop with five hours driving to get to Queenstown”*. While the Tekapo tourist interviews indicated that there are several overnight options in the Tekapo area (see Moore et al., 2009), the lake was seen by frontline staff as an attraction, reporting that *“tourists might decide to stay here even if weather is not good when they arrive in the hope that improves next day”*. A considerable focus of all frontline respondents interviewed in Tekapo, however, was on

Aoraki/Mt Cook; i.e., they were frequently asked for advice on travel times and options for Aoraki/Mt Cook rather than Tekapo itself.

In some cases there is a quite specific link between a destination's position on travel routes and the type of tourist itinerary it fits into. Hanmer Springs, for example, is merely a 'stopover' on the Nelson to Christchurch route, can be a 'day trip' from Christchurch, but is more of a 'destination' on the triangle route that takes in Christchurch and Kaikoura. Tourists' next destination (from Hanmer Springs) also determined how much time they had to spend in the town on their day of departure, i.e., if they were *"travelling a long way to next destination – like Nelson or Fox Glacier – they have no time to do anything in morning before leaving, but if they are only going to Greymouth or Kaikoura they can do something"*. Also, the time of the day tourists depart a destination helps determine what they will do along the way, rather than determining how far they will drive.

Frontline staff in Akaroa (which attracts many day trippers) are also asked a lot about activities people can do when they only have an hour and it is late in the afternoon. Many Akaroa activity operators have set up their trip times to coincide with the arrival times of transport. It can be difficult for a terminal and day-trip destination like Akaroa to promote their surrounding area – while they publish a map, with the town on one side and the wider Banks Peninsula area on the other it is *"hard for people to get that far on a day trip"*. Those who do stay over are often undecided about how long they will stay and while *"they might extend when they arrive and see how beautiful it is"* they can equally *"leave earlier if they find it is too small or the weather is not right, or they might have younger children and want to get back over the hill"*. Also, as noted earlier, many tourists visit Akaroa at the start of their trip and therefore have some imperative to get their onward travel underway.

Tourists' onward travel from Kaikoura was often to Hanmer Springs, which reinforced the strong destination connection between these two places; also, one of the Hanmer Springs backpacker owners had started a transport company linking the two. Many of the questions asked in Kaikoura related to which road tourists should take between these two destinations. Nelson was also popular and most accommodation providers in Kaikoura displayed a large number of Nelson and Golden Bay brochures. Kaikoura also attracts a lot of tourists who are moving on to the inter-island ferry terminal at Picton and, in respect of travel timing, this was the most influential travel route with regard to tourists' Kaikoura visits. A proposal to relocate the ferry terminal was perceived to potentially *"crucify us [Kaikoura accommodation providers] as it will be possible to pop in, do Whale Watch and then drive on to catch a ferry"*.

7.2 Stage of trip

The geographic location of destinations also helps to determine at which stage of a trip tourists might visit; the tourist research found 'stage of trip' to be an important variable (i.e., first-, middle- or final-third – see Moore et al., 2009) in determining the way decision making processes change as a trip progresses. In this respect, both Akaroa and Hanmer Springs are close enough to Christchurch to offer relaxing 'end of trip' destinations; Tekapo and Ashburton also saw themselves filling this role (although the occurrence of this may possibly have increased since the Christchurch earthquake). Both Ashburton and Timaru are very much either beginning or end of trip destinations and had benefitted from this since the Christchurch earthquakes. Overall, most Canterbury destinations attract mainly first- and final-third of trip tourists. Respondents in Kaikoura reported attracting some mid-trip tourists (who are relatively relaxed, but are still interested in doing as much as possible) but suggested that the type of destination might also make a difference, i.e., that *"people are going to be more relaxed in a place like Kaikoura than they would be in Christchurch anyway"*. To some extent the amount of time tourists have available varies according to which stage they are at and, as noted

above, tourists' prior knowledge of a destination sometimes determines how much time they have allowed in that destination.

Stage of trip also impacts on tourists' behaviour. One respondent noted that *"you can tell when [backpacker] tourists are at end of their trip as they want to stay out late drinking, whereas the people just starting their trip want to go to bed early"*. If a destination is encountered at the end of tourists' trip, however, they may not have much money left (especially the case with backpackers). Backpacker accommodation in destinations that attract a lot of tourists at the end of their trip (e.g., Magic Bus en route from Dunedin to Christchurch overnights in Tekapo) find that their guests tend to sit around at the hostel and not spend any money. Other 'end of trip' backpackers reported that tourists in the final third of their trip *"are sometimes bored and just 'sitting it out' until they go home"*. Some destinations may also encounter backpackers when they have 'travel exhaustion' and no longer want to engage with other tourists, or do recognised tourist activities, but instead be more settled – this was particular the case with those on working holidays (see Moore et al., 2009 for more discussion of this type of tourists). Activity providers in Hanmer Springs perceived it to be a benefit that they offered attractions available elsewhere in New Zealand (i.e., that tourists may have missed the opportunity to do earlier in their trip). Overall, however, destinations which attract end of trip tourists do not receive the same financial benefits as those who encounter tourists earlier in their trips.

The role and demands on frontline service providers also vary according to their location and the stage of trip of tourists they deal with. The Christchurch earthquakes impacted on some of the i-SITE respondents with a greater number of tourists seeking itinerary help in Ashburton, Geraldine and Timaru. There are sometimes fewer demands on frontline accommodation staff when tourists are at the beginning of their trip, as they have the first three to four days already mapped out. As noted earlier, however, holiday parks may instead find that they have to offer more practical assistance to campervan tourists who are at the start of their trips. The Tekapo i-SITE often gets people who have *"not long arrived in the country and are just looking for a wee bit of support"*. In practical terms this usually involves helping tourists with itinerary planning; while tourists usually have an idea of what they want to do, *"a lot of them underestimate how long they are going to need to do certain things"*. The Geraldine i-SITE staff find that while a lot of people are quite organised and done a lot of homework on the internet, others have no idea of what they are going to do: *"The most disorganised are usually Australians – probably because they know they are going to feel at home here, there is no language barrier, everything is much the same as Australia, but they do miscalculate driving distances – they don't reckon on our mountains"*.

7.3 Promoting destinations

Informed and appropriate promotion and marketing is important in respect of attracting tourists to a particular destination and ensuring they have allowed enough time to enjoy its attractions. The respondent from the Timaru i-SITE, for example, thought that they needed to do more *"around promoting outside the region to attract people"*. Simply seeing somewhere on a map as a 'place' is not enough and marketing is needed to convey what it offers in order to entice people to not only visit but to also plan to stay. There was widespread belief that poor pre-trip marketing led to tourists not appreciating how much particular destinations had to offer. Poor destination advertising also means that tourists are not aware of the full range of what a destination might offer, e.g., tourists think Hanmer Springs only has the hot pools and *"they don't realise until they get there that it has much more to offer and is worth a few days stay"*. Another criticism was made of 'misplaced' marketing, as in the case of the 'French' flavour of Akaroa. The Akaroa respondents universally agreed that, although people have read about the French history of Akaroa, its natural attractions are more influential in attracting tourists.

Often, however, it is poor information, rather than limited marketing, which contributes to a destination missing out. All the frontline staff interviewed in Tekapo, for example, reported that many tourists are poorly informed about Aoraki/Mt Cook (at its extreme *“thinking they can drive to the top”*, but more commonly not knowing that it was possible to stay there). However, the information and advice given by these frontline staff varied greatly. Most accommodation providers recommend that tourists wait until they get to the Lake Pukaki i-SITE and Lookout to see what the visibility and weather is like before making a decision on whether to go up to Aoraki/Mt Cook. As one Tekapo accommodation provider explained *“[I will] advise people to do or not do things to save them time and energy – like if you can’t see anything [at Lake Pukaki] don’t bother going up to Aoraki/Mt Cook”*. In contrast, the Tekapo i-SITE staff tell tourists that there is *“plenty to do at Aoraki/Mt Cook to fill in a day, whether you get the view of Aoraki/Mt Cook or not – they can still do walks and things like that and go to the Edmund Hillary Centre”*. Others judge (e.g., by looking at them and by their questions) which tourists might be interested in doing walks at Aoraki/Mt Cook and which ones only really want to see the mountain and base their recommendations on that: (e.g., *“there is no point sending them in there if they don’t want to do anything”*).

Respondents in some destinations were often irritated at having to spend so much of their time talking about elsewhere, rather than about their own destination. This was particularly the case with respect to Tekapo and Aoraki/Mt Cook (i.e., tourists asking in Tekapo about Aoraki/Mt Cook); on the other hand the Timaru i-SITE staff were frequently asked about Tekapo. The advertising boards outside i-SITEs also reflected the degree to which they dealt with destinations other than their own. The advertising outside the Geraldine i-SITE in Photo 8, for example, includes that for a local scenic flight operator, a Tekapo scenic flight operator and a Fairlie accommodation option. The same Fairlie accommodation is advertised outside the Tekapo i-SITE, alongside the local Tekapo Helicopters and Skydive Wanaka activity companies (Photo 9).

Photo 8
Advertising outside Geraldine i-SITE



Photo 9
Advertising outside Tekapo i-SITE



Overall, most respondents had admirably altruistic motives and were prepared to contribute their own time to the benefit of tourists' overall New Zealand experience (discussed in terms of tourists *"having the best possible time in New Zealand"*). As one respondent noted, *"it is easy to promote other places, but how much you do it depends on how much time you have"*. On occasion, however, they unwittingly directed tourists away from either visiting or staying in particular locations. Accommodation providers, for example, reported telling their guests that alternative destinations were *"good as a day-trip"* from their location – thus still benefitting from their stay. Several ways of encouraging tourists to stay longer in a destination were suggested by respondents. Frontline service staff, for example, can often persuade tourists to stay longer by showing and/or telling them about things *"off the beaten track"*. Also, one of the backpacker hostel respondents reported that putting guests in different rooms when the hostel was quiet (rather than filling each hostel room up and leaving others empty) often resulted in guests staying longer.

Chapter 8

Discussion and Conclusions

This research examined the role played by frontline service providers in international tourists' decision making. The research followed an earlier investigation of tourist decision making in which 140 international tourists were interviewed at a variety of destinations in the Canterbury region. These interviews with frontline service providers were designed to both confirm the findings of the tourist research and to examine the role of frontline service providers and the nature of their interaction with tourists. An 'ease of travel' perception held by tourists (and reported in earlier research) was fostered by a comprehensive tourist infrastructure (including the i-SITE network) and by the helpfulness of New Zealanders both in the tourism industry and more generally.

Tourists base many of their travel decisions on a combination of information sources including guidebooks, the internet, on-site information (in the form of brochures, signs and maps) and by actively seeking social sources of information and advice. Social sources of information are perceived to provide more personal and local perspectives and to both facilitate and enhance the tourist experience. A key social information source are the frontline service providers who work in the tourism sector i.e., i-SITE and tourist information centre staff, and the owners, managers and staff working in accommodation, activity and transport businesses. Together, these tourism workers offer information (e.g., through the provision of information material and through personal interactions) and advice to tourists on all aspects of their travel.

There are some important differences between these frontline service providers and in the types, amount and geographical scope of the information material they provide for tourists. There are also fundamental (although subtle) differences in the nature of the frontline service provider-tourist relationship; i-SITE staff, for example, offer a formal facilitation service to 'visitors', whereas accommodation providers engage more informally as they act as hosts to their 'guests'. As a result, the frontline staff have different drivers and levels of professionalism which impact on their ability and willingness to assist tourists. The type of help each gives tourists also varies according a combination of interrelated factors including: their frontline service role; the type and geographical location of their destination; which aspects of travel they help tourists with; the type of tourists each deal with; and, the stage of a trip at which they encounter a tourist.

A key difference between the tourists each type of frontline service provider encounters is that those tourists visiting i-SITEs and information centres are usually 'actively' seeking information, whereas in accommodation situations tourists are frequently offered unsolicited information and advice by their hosts as part of the 'conversation' they have with their guests. All frontline service providers, however, will offer information when think there is something tourists need to know. It is notable that, for all frontline service providers, informing and advising tourists involves an unequal exchange of information within which the tourist (often unwittingly) provides the most information. This enables frontline service providers to assess the type of tourists they are dealing with, and to adjust the information and advice they offer accordingly. How well they are able to do this depends on their level of training and experience and, in its practical application, involves the employment of a comprehensive array of customer service strategies. These strategies are sometimes employed to make it easier for the frontline service providers and at other times to help the tourists.

For those frontline staff working outside the official information centres and i-SITEs, their willingness to help tourists depends in part on the amount of time they have available and in their own interest in helping tourists. Accommodation providers, in particular, can sometimes be quite dismissive of individual tourist's needs, instead assuming that all tourists are the same in respect of their

interests, knowledge and in how much help they require. This agrees in part with the findings of the tourist research in that the most common motive for tourists visiting New Zealand was sightseeing, although this was often combined with other motives such as visiting friends and relations (VFR), round the world trips (RTW), working holidays, or holidaying more generally (Moore et al., 2009).

While the majority of respondents in this research denied categorising tourists in any way, many appeared to do so subconsciously and they often based their subsequent approaches to tourists on this prior categorisation. Further, although the 'Type of Trip' classification identified by Moore et al. (2009) did not resonate with most respondents in this research (with the exception of several accommodation hosts), the tourist and travel characteristics on which it was based – age, interests, nationality, transport, length of stay, accommodation – were all used as filters by frontline service providers to classify tourists.

The findings of this research also confirm a number of other key findings from the earlier tourist research (Moore et al., 2009). Of particular interest is the importance of the spatial location of a destination in respect of tourists' decision making and behaviour. Although the collection of information and advice by tourists continues throughout their trip, there are some important variations in the types of information sought according to: a destination's location; what that destination offers in the way of tourist attractions and activities; and, the stage of their trip at which tourists encounter that destination. The importance of stage of trip was a key finding in the earlier tourist research and has some important implications in respect of how, and when, the most effective promotion and marketing should be undertaken. While the accurate promotion of an individual destination's attractions are important, there appears to be considerable potential to appeal to specific types of tourists via targeted campaigns, and to think more carefully about the most effective timing and location in respect of promoting, advertising and marketing destinations. Many tourists appear to have little advance awareness of many destinations' attractions and have no time allowed in their itineraries to stay longer once they do discover these.

While both this and the earlier tourist research suggest that tourists commonly have pre-decided their overall itineraries, and often have limited scope to alter these once in New Zealand, they do, however, have some scope to engage with unplanned activities as they travel. In this respect, those involved in tourism planning and development at an individual destination level should also take account of tourists' 'stage of trip' and of their travel patterns, particularly in respect of what time of the day they are likely to arrive and leave a destination. While many frontline staff are intuitively aware of these travel patterns, and of where their destination and their assistance fit into these, it is likely that they do not always see them as part of the bigger picture that describes tourist behaviour and decision making.

Another important finding associated with the tourists' 'stage of trip' is that tourists learn as they travel, and even experienced tourists require some help with 'understanding' travel in New Zealand at the beginning of their trips. The i-SITE staff, for example, teach tourists that they are "*there to help*" and that, through their nationwide network, can continue to help tourists as they travel. Tourists learn through experience what the best times are to arrive at, or leave, particular destinations and what services are offered by various classes of accommodation. They learn that accommodation, activity and transport providers are also able and willing to, and do, provide (often unprompted) information and assistance, usually at no additional cost. It is these personal (and free) interactions that greatly enhance many tourists' New Zealand travel experience.

Once tourists learn that they can get help in this way they often become less active in their own search for information although, as identified in the earlier research, on-site signage remains important as does the collection of brochures to be passed on to people at home (i.e., to potential New Zealand tourists). Many tourists, however, are more active with regard to seeking out local

advice about attractions and activities that are not listed in their guidebooks or in mainstream advertising; frontline service providers remain a valuable source of information in this respect.

The i-SITEs and information centres are part of a well-established network, and have evolved over time to provide the tourists they serve with appropriate and useful information in each destination. Their ability to do this is based on their own understanding of those tourists' needs and behaviour. Other frontline service providers (such as accommodation hosts) have also come to expect to engage with certain types of tourists (i.e., with particular needs and patterns of behaviour). The newer tourists from emerging markets – who are of different nationalities and cultures and who are considered to be less experienced travellers than those from New Zealand's traditional markets – threaten this status quo. Also, the increasing amount of information available through the internet, alongside the increasing use of the internet by all international tourists to plan, and book their own travel is changing the nature of the assistance they require from frontline service providers.

Some early signs of these changes have also been noted by Tourism New Zealand in their Visitor Experience Monitoring research, in which they report on tourists' awareness and usage of i-SITEs, and the influence of i-SITEs on visitor behaviour and on the visitor holiday experience (Tourism New Zealand, 2011). For the Year Ended June 2011, a reduction in the number of tourists participating in activities is thought to have contributed to a decrease in the number of tourists using i-SITEs; also, of the tourists who do use i-SITE an increasing number are merely seeking information rather than making bookings. There has also been a shift away from tourists looking for general information on regions to more specific information on specific paid for attractions and activities. According to Tourism New Zealand (2011, p. 3), "this change in i-SITE user behaviour implies that i-SITE staff need to be more flexible when handling different information requests and be more engaging with i-SITE users during their information collection process". The use of the internet and, in particular, smart phones is thought to have contributed to the decline in i-SITE use and Tourism New Zealand (2011) also reported that, out of a sample of almost 2,000 tourists, over 68% either use a mobile phone or smart phone during their stay in New Zealand. Specific technology use which had either remained constant or increased since the previous year included: own mobile set to global roaming (51%, from 50%); own laptop (37%, same) and wi-fi internet locations (34%, from 28%); whereas the use of internet cafes (28%, from 41%) had gone down.

These research data show that the increased use of the internet by tourists appears to have a mixed impact on frontline service providers. In some cases, for example, the internet offers both systems and services that make their jobs easier (especially in the case of internet accommodation bookings). In other cases, however, the internet presents new challenges in respect of frontline service providers' engagement with tourists. Frontline service providers, for example, increasingly have to 'mediate' internet information and are often called upon to 'fix' internet bookings that tourists have either got wrong, or which need to be changed. While the internet does have some advantages over other static and inanimate information sources (such as guidebooks, for example), in that it offers some 'visuals' and 'real-time' interaction via cyberspace, it is still lacking the personal input offered by frontline service providers. The Tourism New Zealand (2011) i-SITE research, however, also noted the importance of staff service and noted that the level of this staff service varied: staff were reported as the major reason for both positive and negative comments about i-SITE service. As the respondents interviewed in this research repeatedly noted, it was their passion and enthusiasm for their own destinations (and for New Zealand in general), and their genuine engagement on a personal level with tourists, that characterises frontline service provision and which, ultimately, has the most impact on tourist decision making.

While tourists use a range of information sources, their 'social' engagement with people working in the tourism industry (i.e. the frontline service providers) is particularly important as they people offer informed and accurate information that both facilitates and enhances travel experiences.

While tourists appear to be strongly influenced by these social encounters, and the advice and help they receive, it is presented in a way that suggests tourists are often unaware of how much they are being directed towards particular behaviours. This fosters an illusion of free independent travel and satisfies the type of travel experience many tourists are seeking in New Zealand. Importantly, tourists' engagement with frontline service providers goes beyond the mere provision of information and facilitation of travel as it adds to tourists' enjoyment and forms part of the total New Zealand tourist experience.

References

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